

Title: Death's Pride

Chapter1 – What Do You Mean I'm Dead!

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Rating: M

Warnings: Adult Language

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key:"Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parseltongue§

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[Author's Note:] This story is created from Reptilia28's challenge against the norm of 'Harry going back in time'. This will be only to set the stage, so is mostly dialog and information. Chapter 2 will be the "About" chapter and Chapter 3 will be the start of the real story by the Gringotts trip and summer description, chap 4 will be where things pick up in action and such. My 'About' chapter gives any other miscellaneous info you may need or request. Also, and I apologize for the inconvenience as this isn't how I normally do things, but I am starting this fic with the belief that the readers know who the Canon cast are. If not, the MAIN characters will be given a brief introduction, but will be stilted. This will be the case for Luna, Neville, Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore, etc. The main characters beyond Harry and Hermione.

The relationship won't be immediate. In fact, it will be about halfway to near the end of third year at the earliest. There will be a lot of fluff and innuendo and such because I like fluff and innuendo makes for fun jokes.

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This challenge was also accepted by:

"Don't Fear the Reaper" by KittyDemon18

"In Time" by Artemis Day

"Tabula Rasa" by Reptilia28

"Harry Potter and the Demon of Time" by El Pepe

"A Potter's Death: Last Chance" by Kunitzin

"Forty One Times Dead" by Ruskbyte

xXx STORY xXx

Harry Potter, a seventeen year old wizard, sat confused in his chair as he watched an attractive woman, oddly with forest green hair, behind what looked like a receptionist's desk type furiously on a keyboard made of a glowing mist while a glowing screen of what he could only assume to be another language hung suspended in the air. Harry could feel himself moving and looking around, but everyone and everything that came into his vision seemed to be moving at incredible speeds while he seemed to be going through the water in the Black Lake at Hogwarts. It sounded about the same as well. He wanted to speak with the receptionist, but the will to actually speak, the energy to do so, just didn't seem to be in him.

He was unsure of how long he had actually sat there, just trying to turn his head from the left side of the pretty receptionist to the door on the right side of her when things suddenly sped up drastically and his head turned far faster than he had expected it to, cracking slightly as the bones cracked and popped, energy seemingly flooding back into him.

"Potter! Harry Potter!" Harry rocked his head back and forth, trying to get the painful crick out of his neck as he stood, turning to the new girl who walked in with a clipboard in her hand.

"Right here, Ma'am," he said, raising his hand slightly. She motioned for him to follow her as she turned on her heel and began to walk down a long hallway. Harry did as prescribed and followed her, taking note of her appearance as he tried to figure out where he was.

His mind felt muddled and murky and he couldn't quite figure out if he knew this woman from somewhere or not.

This woman had very deep blue eyes, he could remember from when she had motioned for him to follow, and her hair was such a dark blue that it appeared black until it moved enough for some light to come through showing its true color. She was very petite and had the body of a fully adult woman, though she appeared to be about the same age as himself. He also couldn't help but notice how much her steady walk reminded him of Hermione's. Each step deliberate and with the purpose of getting her from where she was, to where she wanted or needed to be with each step echoing loudly down the long hallway. And while the way she walked reminded him of Hermione, the way she held herself seemed oddly like Ginny with her shoulders back but her hair sashaying around as she moved her head slightly, full of confidence and the knowledge that she was attractive.

It was about the time he was comparing this woman's walk to Hermione's that he realized she was muttering under her breath, though he could only make out the odd word now and then.

"... Grandpa Whiskers better ... reason ... gonna kill the little ..."

After about four minutes of walking down a straight hallway, they came to the very first door Harry could recall seeing the entire trip. Scrunching up his eyes, he looked first at the door and then back down the hallway, seeing bare white walls all the way to the door at the end that they came through that appeared as a black rectangle surrounded by white light. Finding it curious, he looked further down the hall in the direction they had been walking and saw that it extended beyond his vision with bare, white walls and no other doors.

"In here, Potter." The woman motioned for him to enter as she closed the door behind them. He was a little worried when her tone came across as frosty as Snape's on a bad day.

"Excuse me, Miss, but where am I? What happened?" Harry asked confusedly, having difficulty keeping his thoughts clear, though his mind was getting better quickly. He took the offered chair in front of a large desk cleared of almost everything but several folders, a stone box that looked oddly like a shoe box without a noticeable lid

and a few writing utensils. The walls were lined wall to wall with ancient-looking tomes that would have made Hermione green with jealousy and envy. The woman sighed as she sat down heavily, looking at Harry with exasperation.

"Do you hate me, Harry? Is that what this is? Are you wanting to get me fired for all of these early deaths? One more premature death, ONE MORE! And I'm through!" The tiny woman yelled. Surprised, Harry could only stare in open-mouthed shock as the woman seemed to crack in front of him, a tear trailing down her cheek.

"Wha- Ma'am, I'm sorry, but I don't even know you!" Nervous, he moved a little closer to the desk, wanting to try and comfort the girl, but having no clue how and not feeling comfortable enough to go to the other side of the desk. Particularly after mentioning the whole 'premature deaths' thing. It had to be a joke, right?

"No, of course you don't! Just like all the other times, you're completely innocent of your own demise," she waved off his concern and laid her head on her arms over the top of her desk as she growled in frustration.

"My demise? You mean I really am dead?" Suddenly, Harry wasn't so upset about the girl crying anymore. When she snorted and raised her head, she looked more amused than upset now. "But... but how!"

"Yes, just like all the other times we've met, Harry," she said as she leaned back in her large chair with a face of utter confusion over her visage. "I don't get it! You're supposed to go to school, get powerful as hell with the help of your soulmate, some Granger girl I think," she mumbled, checking into a file on the desk with a nod, "kick Voldemort's slimy arse and live to be a little over two hundred years old under a pile of multi-great grand babies! But no! You have to keep dying on me!" Harry cringed as her voice rose in the beginning, got quiet to where he could barely hear about Hermione and then become louder and more angry than it had up to that point.

"Wait! 'Granger girl'? Hermione is my soulmate? What about Ginny? And how am I dead? What the hell is going on!" Harry cried out pleadingly. The girl sighed and leaned back into her chair, squirming into its large backing, making her petite frame appear horribly tiny and fragile in comparison as she sunk into the leather backing.

"I suppose I should start at the beginning so you're up to date," she mumbled in a way that was half-growl. Harry simply nodded dumbly as the woman leaned on her desk.

"Yes please," he plead. She smiled fondly at him in appreciation. Of all of the dead that come through her doors, none were ever so kind or polite as this mortal had been. Well, except for that once, but she couldn't exactly hold him to that. It wasn't every day you found out that a dragon buggered you to death. He had cried under her desk for the next twelve dead souls to come into her office. His pitiful wails had terrified them more than being told they were dead.

"Firstly, introductions. I am Lora. I am an Angel of Death, or more specifically, I manage the lives of certain mortals so that, when they die, I can make sure they go to the correct afterlife, or if needed, back to the realm of the living if they didn't learn what they were supposed to, or do what they were supposed to do while alive." She raised a hand to forestall any questions from him as he opened his mouth. "In your case, and those like it, where you die before you are supposed to, we send you back so that you have another chance to fix whatever the hell it is you buggered up in the first place." He had the grace to look ashamed.

"Now, I know you, and you do not know me, because your memory of this," she waved her hand in a small circle to indicate everything around them, "is wiped out each time because we can't have people learning of certain elements of the afterlife and how it works or it makes it easier for mortals to try and bypass the system and either go where they want or stay alive, much like your enemy of the mortal world."

"You mean Voldemort?" Harry asked before he cringed a little in fear as the woman glared harshly towards the distance. Goosebumps sprung up along his arms and neck as the air seemed to suddenly get cooler. Most people shivered in fear when his name was mentioned. This woman just got pissed!

"Yes," she hissed, "him."

"Ah," Harry said, unsure what else he could add. The woman looked to be sixteen to nineteen, but she scared the hell out of him. He was sure he saw his breath.

"Now, here's the bit you really need to pay attention to, because I don't like having to repeat myself and I only plan to answer your question once." She waited until Harry nodded before continuing. "Now, off and on from the beginning of summer before your fourth year, one Ginny Weasley had been slipping you love potions with the help of her mother in the food they sent you over the summer. They started out small, so you didn't suddenly show devotion and love to a girl you hadn't shown any previous romantic interest in. They worked, but only partly. Your magic naturally works against the affects of a love potion just like your body fights an illness. It was willing to allow you to fall in love with whomever you cared for, which at the time was Hermione Granger and-"

"No, in forth year I fancied Cho Chang. Your information ... is ... wrong ... ?" Harry said, interrupting her. He realized it probably wasn't a bright, or even safe, idea when she glared at him.

"You fought off the unnatural portion to begin to care for the Weasley girl and it focused instead on your original love, Hermione Granger," she looked into a folder as she spoke, confirming her information again, "by merely fought off the targeting effect, leaving you being forced into love, but without a person. It seemed to do this because you subconsciously wanted to love and care for someone, but were too scared to try and worried too much about being unlovable. Normally, you would have realized your feelings for the Granger girl during that summer and have been obvious to her in time for the Yule ball for her to agree, but as you weren't fully aware of what you wanted yourself or the reality of loving emotions, your magic worked on the information you already knew, which was the closest thing to Hermione you could get, which was Cho Chang. You simply didn't understand what you were feeling," she finished with a shrug. "Your subconscious knew you wanted the Granger girl, but your body chose Chang for her beauty and supplanted her instead since she was the closest to Granger you knew and your hormones selected someone easy to lust after."

"So, everything between Ginny and I... it was a lie?" Harry asked hollowly. Lora mentally flinched as he seemed to radiate sadness. At least she had a way to make it up to him.

"On your side, yes. She wanted you for your money and fame and had it stuck in her mind that you and her were like characters in a

fairy tale. She and the youngest brother are very unhappy with their lives and how they've turned out. They feel they should be wealthier like a 'proper pureblood' family. They aren't blood supremacists or anything, but are well aware that their family is about the only pureblood family that lives like it does. The girl wants you and the boy wants the wealth and prestige of being associated with you. He's basically a leech with an inferiority complex."

"The mother, while normally a good soul, wants what is best for her family, which is you in this case. She feels that she loves you like her own, and having you as the husband of the youngest would be the best route for all involved and it didn't really hurt anything since you'd be with a family that cared for you as well and you would have cared for her, even if not loved her. And the mother feels she could provide you a loving family if she had you with her daughter, therefore feeling it was a winning situation with everyone. She honestly believed she was doing the best thing possible for you and truly does care for you. She just felt she knew what was best."

Harry, though he didn't want to believe it, knew that she was telling him the truth. That was how Mister and Missus Weasley got together, because Missus Weasley used a love potion on him. While it worked out in their case as a happy marriage, it romanticized the fact that it was illegal, immoral and just simply wrong. And made it seem all the more likely to lead to a happy ending. Ginny herself had told him how much she loved the story. Harry was also well aware of her mentioning of Ron. He was always jealous and petty whenever something that he wanted was given to Harry, or he simply wanted something that Harry had. There were quite a few times in his past to choose from for evidence. And it usually took nearly losing Harry to bring him into the state of mind to accept whatever it was.

"So, this caused my magic to fight against the potion, what else do I need to know?" Harry asked dejectedly. Lora was a little worried that Harry decided to ignore the situation and continue, but didn't think anything else could come of it, so did as asked.

"Well, since it was constantly fighting the potions you were being given, it caused your magic to be split between that and whatever you used it for, which caused your spells to be weaker and such. It didn't really affect you as badly until they upped the dosage after fourth year when your mind was the weakest. Another reason I bring it up is because, as a baby, you were already immensely powerful.

In the wizarding world, it wasn't a big deal. There were safety guards in place for bouts of accidental magic, though yours was always controlled. However, after your parents were killed, Dumbledore placed a power-limiting seal on you, which left you with access to only about two percent of your overall magical ability, which was all that was left after your magic defended you against Voldemort's killing curse. It was enough to keep you alive, but without the use of magic. You were already very weak from defending yourself and he was terrified that you had the power to break through most power-limiting seals, so he placed the strongest he knew how on you."

Harry looked more confused than when they began. "But I've used magic several times when I was growing up, and I never meant to for the times I remember, so how was it controlled?"

Lora shook her head and thought of the best way to explain. "I was referring to when you were an infant. The seal he put on you kept you blocked and kept part of your mental abilities locked away as well. When you used magic growing up, it was accidental after you began living with the Dursleys because you couldn't control it at that point because it was unnatural to you and your mind was a little weaker. Basically, magic is about as much magical ability as it is mental ability. This particular seal was used because it was powerful enough to hold back the majority of your magic and mostly, just affected your ability to focus on anything specific without holding your mind back. So, you could learn and function as normal, but you always had a hard time retaining anything or focusing on something unless you truly applied yourself to it. Like magically-induced attention deficit disorder. Dumbledore thought that he had to put that seal on you so the Dursleys would be more comfortable."

"But why?" He asked, almost pitifully. Lora sighed yet again, realizing she was doing a lot of it with him. It was difficult when working with children because they were totally innocent and generally knew whatever had happened to them was unfair. It was much the same with Harry simply because he had been so restrained growing up, never really experiencing life much like any younger child.

"The Dursleys hated all magic, even before you arrived. Your aunt was jealous of your mother and your Uncle is actually a second-generation squib," she said to Harry's shock. "Dumbledore did it as a way to make sure you couldn't accidentally perform magic when



other muggles were around and to let them feel they'd have a somewhat normal home. It just didn't work out that way. They still knew you were magical. When you had access to only two percent of your magic, and were being starved and needed to heal from the abuse, it couldn't go past that two percent, but it could adapt and make that two percent larger by increasing your over all reserves of magic. It did so to keep you healthy and alive." Now Harry was really getting confused.

"How could it do that, though? Is it even possible to increase only a certain portion?" Lora smiled, happy he had asked a question that was important and relevant, even if he didn't realize it.

"No, it isn't. You see, to increase that two percent to double its original size, it had to increase the other ninety-eight percent as well, effectively doubling your entire magical core. Otherwise, it would be more like a balloon where different bits bubbled up like boiling water which could rupture it. Because of that, when you made it to Hogwarts and were able to perform magic normally and still with a moderate amount of power, Dumbledore thought you'd found some way to break through his seal and never gave it a second thought. That isn't how it's supposed to work, but you did it somehow and-"

"Wait..." Harry suddenly had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Are you saying that the seal has been active the entire time? Even when I performed the Patronus charm in third year? During the Tri-Wizard Tournament and at the Department of Mysteries?" Lora smiled at Harry as he figured it out.

"Exactly! Even with that block on all of your magic and mind the entire time, your magic was able to fight and help you by different means. It was with the potions, however, where things got horrible and you wound up dying left and right. Beginning fourth year, you died at least once each year, upwards of three. Add to the fact that Grandpa Whiskers never bothered to train you and left you flailing about on your own, it didn't help matters." Harry blushed and slumped into his chair.

"So, am I going up or down?" Harry asked, ignoring her name for Dumbledore. It just didn't seem like an important bit of information in the light of things.

Lora looked confused a moment before realizing what he meant and laughed. "Oh! No, you aren't staying dead," she said, amused at his thoughts.

Harry looked up in a mix of hope and confusion, mostly the latter. "Then why tell me all of this if I'm just going to forget it again? Wouldn't it be easier for you to just send me back? I mean, you said my memory was wiped each time anyway."

"Yes, it would. However, the reason you've been going back is because Riddle should have died the night he attacked you, but he learned something to keep himself alive and we need him killed because he plans to kill all life, or at least enslave it. And we can't have that. He has plans, evil plans, that are going to literally be the end of the world and we can't directly interfere. Understand?"

Harry nodded, already knowing that the 'something' she'd mentioned were Voldemort's horcruxes that he placed a bit of his soul into. "So, while he's alive and has his horcruxes, he can't be killed by anyone except me, so you need me to go back and take him out so that he can't basically take over the world?"

"Right," Lora smiled brightly and bounced in her seat as Harry figured it out.

"Great," he grouched. "No pressure."

Lora glared at him with a smirk as she continued. She was furious that she was so close to becoming fired and risking a different type of job that was literally a Hellish existence, but with her charge, or 'minion' as she liked to claim in her head, able to keep his memory, she was really looking forward to this next installment into his life.

"Now, technically, he can be killed in any of the usual ways, but he'll come back because of his horcruxes and sadly, because of the prophecy. The world will bend around Fate to make sure that it comes to that. She always wins in a war of attrition with Time since Destiny is her sister."

Harry cocked his head to the side and frowned as he thought. "So, why can't you just get him yourself? Or someone else? If you have the power to send me back, then shouldn't you have the ability to bring someone in?"

Lora grimaced as she thought of the best way to explain. "It isn't as simple and clear cut as all of that. You see, while we can control some aspects, all things have a balance. Life and death, good and evil, light and darkness, men and women, smart people and idiots. Where you can consider my side as angels, there is the other side that you can consider the demons, so to speak. While both sides are just as varied as humans in that we have some on both sides that are good and evil, we are only able to do certain things within limits." She frowned as she continued, not sure how best to phrase everything to someone who didn't already fully understand the real concept of angel and demon.

"Angels and demons are simply terms that mankind created, or at least the meanings are. Demons, for lack of a better way of phrasing it, are evil, true, and they do want to take over the living earth as you know it, but they cannot live on that plane of existence. Neither can angels, to be honest with you. At least not properly."

"What do you mean 'not properly'?" He asked, extremely curious about the lesson he was getting. Hermione would be so jealous.

"Well, we could go there for brief periods of time, but we slowly die as we stay there. Our power slowly drains and doesn't regenerate, even if we aren't using it. Once we lose so much, we don't even have enough to come back here and will die, even though we still have some power. I may be immortal, but without my own power, I would just cease to exist. There are only a few ways to deal with it, and none of which are pleasant. But we're getting off track." Harry nodded to show he understood.

"Right. Your world has a perfect balance of so many different energies and life that both sides want, but neither can actually have. It's the epicenter of numerous realities and worlds and generates its own energies while absorbing that of others, making it wholly unique. Where we can deal with that and try to maintain the balance between the worlds and realities, they would rather no one have your world if they can't, which is one of the biggest dividing lines we have. So I and my," she stumbled a little for a term he would understand, "coworkers ... can't go there because that would be abusing the power and the treaty that was agreed upon when the living world was discovered. While we can influence, we cannot

directly interfere." She held up a finger to be sure he paid attention to what she was about to say.

"To keep the peace, so to speak, and ensure the other side wouldn't ignore an offer of peace between us, we came upon an agreement where we don't directly interfere, but are still able to wage a war since they wouldn't stop totally. It was necessary if we wanted to stop the Demonic Wars on your world. There will be some who are born purely with good intentions and those who are born purely of evil intentions that we call 'Avatars'. They're also known as 'Saints' in your world, though the evil ones aren't usually as well known to the public. These are the ones who we can send to regulate and influence the living world and we can work through them, should they be open to it and allow it. Many prefer to be unknown and remain behind the scenes so as not to cause people to fight directly against them, whichever side they are on, but then there are those who would rather be icons to try and rally others behind. Think of them as Dumbledore and Riddle, respectively, even though they aren't Avatars. Dumbledore works through proxies and stays behind the scenes while Riddle took on the title of Lord Voldemort to try and lead his forces."

"Riddle, as you know him, wasn't pre-dispositioned for anything, actually. But he did turn evil and killed one of those who were. He had learned some rather heinous techniques and wound up absorbing the connection from one of those who were predestined for pure evil when he stole their magical core. At that point, he opened himself freely to the shadow and has been communicating with demons, learning from them and doing their bidding," she shook her head as she finished, truly disgusted with the man. "That is what allows us to take the actions we do. Time travel is normally not allowed, as it interferes with literally all of existence, but we have authorization due to the nature of the shadow's infraction."

"And that's why you're sending me back?" Harry wanted to be very sure that he got an affirmative on this one. "Wait ... Time travel?"

"Yes, Harry, we are not sending you to exactly when you died, unless of course you want us to. Because of the trouble Riddle has been giving us and such, you are being sent back to a point where you can make the biggest changes with the least amount of trouble, but without the risk of changing too much."

"So, when am I going back?" Harry nodded, understanding the value of the idea.

Lora smiled at Harry in a way far too reminiscent of the Weasleys and Sirius. "There are actually two answers to that question." Lora got up and began to scan her way through a few of the books behind her desk. "As I've told you, we normally wipe a person's memories of what happened after they died when we send them back because we can't let certain facts come out about the afterlife. It was us not taking all the precautions we should have that allowed for several myths and such about death to be frighteningly close to the truth, though I still don't know where they got that bloody scythe idea from." She grumbled and pulled out one book and began scanning again.

"Because of these precautions, we can't send you back and allow Grandpa Whiskers, Snape and anyone else the ability to rummage around in your head, so you'll be getting a few books in long-forgotten magics on what you now know as occlumency and a few others that we're clearing for you to take with you and allowing you to keep as Potter family information, mainly because these magics are in books in your world, just not where it can be obtained without knowing exactly where it is." She grabbed a third and fourth book off the shelf as she spoke and Harry's eyes got wider and wider.

"This is just easier than making you go on a long trip that would be hard to explain," another three books hit the pile, "to get those old tomes and these will be in much better condition. We'll be sending you back to just before your second year at Hogwarts ended so you can schedule a meeting with Gringotts and get things started. We would actually like to send you back to the beginning of your second year, but don't want you to have to face that damned basilisk again." She stacked a pile of seven scrolls, each nearly as big around as her head and nearly as wide as she was tall, next to the pile of books.

"So I'm going back to just as my second year ends and then what? I just read during the summer and make the changes I can to make things better?" He asked, beginning to wonder at the enormity of the situation. Lora gave him a look that basically screamed 'You're an idiot' while setting five more books on the desk with a loud thump.

"Those magical wards that Whiskers," Harry's mouth twitched at the nickname, thinking he'd adopt it, "said protect you are love-based magic. That means there has to be love to power them for full functionality. Your mother's blood, or your aunt's in this case, keeps them around, but the power is all about, and based, on love. The love you feel for your parents allows the defensive properties to survive within you, but you largely used up the power you had in your first year to stop Quirrell, much like a battery. It would take a decade to fill them up again, leaving only the wards left. However, they are worthless except for keeping Voldemort's spirit from entering to take you over, but I'm taking care of that for you. The only things keeping you safe there are wards based on ill-intent and owl-redirection wards. So you need to go to Gringotts, take your role as Head of the House of Potter, become emancipated, which means you can legally perform magic whenever you want and will have full access to your family vaults, and get out of Dumbledore's thumb and move into one of your family's homes." She grabbed a much thinner book from a drawer and set it on top of the others while Harry's mind was still reeling. That pile of books was now taller than she was!

"Our explanation for giving you what would normally be considered restricted knowledge is based on the fact that you can get all of it after you go back; it would just take a little while to track them down and Voldemort has several years' worth of experience on you and has been getting influence and outright direction from the shadow," she stacked all of the books on top of each other along with some smaller pamphlet-sized ones and several smaller scrolls and began moving her hands over them slowly, causing them to seemingly melt into one another, "and we can safely say that the balance requires this." As she finished speaking, the books had stopped their melting and were simply now one single book that was about as thick as his hand was wide, three feet tall and two feet wide. Huge even by Hermione's standards, making him happy when she waggled her hand and shrunk it to only slightly larger than normal at a foot and a half tall by a foot wide.

"What's that?" He asked, curious about all that material being shrunk down. She smiled brightly at him.

"This is a grimoire, or a massive amount of knowledge of magic in one tome. Basically, all of those books and scrolls that were stacked there just became this one, single book," she said happily, opening it to the first page to show him the table of contents. "You will simply

state the section you want and then open it to the next page and it will begin with the book you stated. You can also just give it a topic and open it randomly. The more that goes into it, the more accurate and better it becomes."

"What about the book that was about three times this one's size? Will it fit when I open it?" He asked. She smiled at him in a manner that he would have expected to have seen on Hermione.

"The covers on the front and back will actually open extra pages as needed or absorb the previous ones as you flip through them. Think of it as a muggle Rolodex where the pages go in a circle-like fashion."

"Ah. Do you suppose-

"Don't worry. One of the scrolls in here is a way for you to do it. Just ask for 'book combining spells' and you should find it without troubles, along with the other book-related spells for restoring them, keeping them in good shape, creating others out of knowledge in one's mind and other spells of the like." Harry grinned brightly at her, already planning on giving the spell to Hermione.

"Now, inside of this book are several for combat dueling, mental defenses, warding, healing, security, horcruxes since you'll need everything on destroying them, magical guardians and creatures, animagus transformations, wandless magics and several other things that were included in those books." When she looked up at him, she noticed his eyes were rather ... bulgy.

"Don't worry, Harry," she said laughing. "You don't have to learn everything, just what you think will help. A lot of it is information that you will find in the Hogwarts library or other places, just not as easily or in as much depth since most of it is in hidden locations in your world. The only thing I am going to tell you to learn before your third year is the mental defense bits. You may want to look into the combat dueling as well, though, and maybe the wandless magic. The rest can be looked at as you wish. I would recommend you eventually look through a good deal of it, however. You'll want to look up the horcrux information sooner or later."

"Er, alright." Harry felt like gasping from the mental strain of everything. So much to do and so much to take in, it was just

overwhelming! "Um, you said 'mental defenses'. Is that different than occlumency?" Lora blinked at him for a moment before nodding.

"Yes, actually. It is. Occlumency is more of a vault-like technique, where this is crafting your mind to be more of a defensible location. This is far easier to learn, but more vulnerable until you've truly set it up, whereas occlumency will give you walls around your mind that start out flexible and get stronger, as long as you do it properly. The problem, though, is that it takes a very long time to get to a high enough proficiency at it to keep Snape, Dumbledore and Voldemort out if they're really trying and you don't end up with near the kind of control over yourself as you can have with this. This will be weak until you really get at it, then it's only as weak as you make it, or as strong as you make it instead of being something that can simply be broken through with brute force as occlumency would allow until you've had years to develop the ability. All things aside, it has the potential to be stronger than anything else, but requires more upkeep and leaves you more vulnerable in the beginning is all." Harry nodded. He really had a good many more questions, but decided he would learn them by simply reading the books she gave him. Well, book, really.

"Alright... So, when do I leave?"

Lora smiled in a manner far too reminiscent of the Weasley twins for Harry's liking as she opened the folder on the bottom of the others and pulled out a stack of papers and slid them to him with a pen.

"I'll be sending you back as soon as you sign this contract." Harry narrowed his eyes at the smiling Lora as she looked at him with the fakest expression of innocence he had ever seen. And that was after several years of watching Dudley blame mishaps on him.

"What does the contract say?" He began to scan the pages, looking for any words that would hopefully jump out and catch his attention. He was fidgety with contracts ever since his fourth year.

"Basically, that you are going back to the realm of the living with your memories intact and," she paused so slightly that Harry wasn't sure he had caught it or not, "have guidance from us, can't tell anyone about the afterlife you've experienced aside from those you trust and they must also keep it in the strictest of confidence and you can only tell them after teaching them the occlumency from this



book, that this is your last shot to get things right and the like." She peered at the paper as if seeing if he had written his name yet. "Also, if you don't sign it, you stay dead, so it really is for the best, after all. Sign your name on the first page and last page, please." She fluttered her eyelashes at him while trying to look cute while he pouted and put the pen to the paper and did as he was told. Once he was done, the contract rose into the air and disappeared with a flash of light and resounding clack of thunder.

"Huh... flashy..." He blinked at where the paper disappeared until Lora rose from her chair with a large grin.

"Alright! Don't tell anyone about what you know until they've learned occlumency and try not to look anyone in the eyes until you've learned it! The book and box will be in your trunk when you get back!" Suddenly, the entire room began to shift and rotate, fading away.

"Hey... Wait! What box are you talking about?" As everything went black, he heard her disembodied voice float towards him.

"You will ... to ... r-" As the voice left and the room he was in shimmered out of view, Harry found himself in total darkness before he was suddenly thrust into a cacophony of noise. He looked around and found himself in the Great Hall. The first discernible thing he heard was Neville's voice.

"Harry, Ron! Look!" Harry saw him pointed towards the entrance and when he turned, he saw a mane of bushy hair above a smiling face before the freshly unpetrified Hermione rocketed towards him and enveloped him in a tight hug. Harry was surprised at the rush of emotions that suddenly filled him, the same ones that he felt when this happened the first time. Unbidden, words flew out of his mouth as if he were an observer in the body.

"Hermione," he whispered into her ear, "if you ever make me worry that badly again, I'm going to be forced to kidnap you and subject you to days on end of the tickling charm." He squeezed her a little tighter before releasing her, her face slightly flushed from amusement and happiness before she almost hugged Ron, both suddenly stopping and deciding instead to shake hands.

Harry mentally frowned as he tried to decide what he was going to do about the Weasleys, but decided he had plenty of time to figure it out since Lora said it would be during the summer after next year it all started. Instead, he made sure they sat together as they did before and he ignored pretty much everything except Hermione, Ron and Hagrid's entrance, making sure to make his speech to Hagrid was as close as he could remember to the original, all eight words of it. After everyone went to the common rooms after the feast, he decided he would get that letter sent out to Gringotts as quickly as possible.

He quickly went upstairs as soon as he passed the portrait of the fat lady and went to his trunk for paper and quill when he saw the book that Lora had told him would be there along with the stone box and a letter stuck to it. Ignoring the stone box for now, he grabbed the large book along with the other supplies he needed and went back downstairs to sit at the table that had unofficially been left alone as his, Hermione's and Ron's and began to write.

Griphook, or whomever my account manager is:

My name is Harry Potter. I am writing this letter to alert Gringotts of my plans to arrive on the second of July to find out my full account holdings, the status of my accounts and their activity, who has access to these accounts, get any emancipation paperwork taken care of to become fully and legally emancipated and see about my parents' will. It is my intention to take up the mantle as the Head of the House of Potter.

None of this has yet to have been done for me or with me, and I was curious about all of it. I have recently learned that things and people in my life are not as they appear and the Goblin Nation has yet to give me any reason to doubt or not trust in them. I believe there are owl redirection wards around my residence in Surrey, so I am afraid I do not believe anything you send will make it to me via that method of communication.

I am familiar with Griphook, which is why I addressed this to him. If this is not who I should be speaking with, I apologize.

I would also request a portkey to bring me from my place of residence to Gringotts and back to my starting point. I am aware that there is most likely a fee for this and am fully willing to pay for it. You

may withdraw any funds necessary from my vault as needed. I can, and will, take another method of transportation if this is either not available or is for any reason ill-advised.

I thank you for your time,

Harry James Potter

Harry quickly signed the letter with a flourish and then tilted his head back, letting out a loud, but sad-sounding whistle that fell in pitch, getting the attention of everyone in the common room, including Ron and Hermione who were sitting next to him, though Hermione had been eying his new book and inching toward it ever so slowly.

"Harry, mate, what was that!" Ron's question was answered a moment later as Hedwig, in all of her snowy-white beauty, flew in from the window and landed on Harry's shoulder.

"Nothing ... I just called Hedwig..." In truth, he wasn't sure why he did that to call her. She usually just came on her own when he needed her, but he had to admit, the sound was pretty nice. He ignored everyone's questioning gaze as he tied the letter to Hedwig's waiting leg.

"To Griphook, girl. After this, I think you'll enjoy your new home," he whispered into her ear. Hedwig nipped at his fingertips affectionately before taking flight. Harry watched her go before turning to his book, the same book that Hermione still had targeted in her sights and had covered just over half of the distance towards.

'I know I should tell her what it is, or let her read it, but this is so much more fun!' Harry smiled lightly as he began to read about the seal that had been placed on him.

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Harry awoke the next day to Hedwig's hooting from his headboard. Apparently, she had spent the night going to and from Gringotts to get everything her master needed taken care of, which Harry was eternally grateful for, but she was obviously tired and her feathers somewhat ruffled.

"Thanks, girl. Come to breakfast and I promise to have as much bacon as you can eat ready for you." Hedwig eyed him suspiciously for a moment before letting out an odd trilling hoot and flying off with an aerial flourish, making Harry wonder just how much his familiar enjoyed the crispy goodness. Shaking his head, he opened the letter with a smile and hoping for good news.

Mr Potter,

We at Gringotts thank you for warning us of your impending visit. It will allow us to be very sure that we have all paperwork ready and waiting for you. We only wish more witches and wizards were as candid as you have been.

Your date for the second of July is acceptable with us. We have provided a portkey for your safe arrival and return. It is this parchment, in fact. It will bring you to Gringotts' reserved portkey and apparition zone. This location is heavily guarded and only used under special conditions. This is our gesture of thanks for alerting us to your requests in advance and we have charged you nothing for it. Please do not expect this to be a regular occurrence. Future portkeys will cost the mandatory twelve sickles. You may arrive with one other as your advisor if you so choose, but any more than that will result in a defensible action. Please do not force our hand.

All paperwork you requested, has been noted and should be obtained some time today for your arrival tomorrow. It will consist of all you have requested and any other documents we felt you may wish to see afterwards. It would seem we have much to discuss.

As you have mentioned Griphook, he will be present, but will not be handling most matters. Your family's account has been inactive for some time and therefore, has no account manager. The Head of our accounts department, Senior Advisor Fangstone, shall handle your meeting.

Sincerely,

Bloodclaw

Senior Advisor, Head of Relations

Gringotts Wizarding Bank, London Branch

Harry smiled widely as he realized things were beginning to go as needed. Securing the parchment into the front cover of the book that Lora had given him with a sticking charm, he set it to the side and took a quick shower before any of the others woke up. Once done, he grabbed the book and went down to the Great Hall to keep his promise to Hedwig.

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Hermione had been watching Harry all day. It wasn't so much that he was acting odd, as it was that he had a book that appeared older than anything in the library, and she noticed rather irritably that it did not have a title on the spine, and he was reading it constantly. She had first noticed him in the Great Hall with Hedwig on his shoulder, eagerly eating from a large pile of bacon and reading the book as he chewed, being careful to not get any grease on the pages. Her first thought was that it was a book much thicker than anything he would voluntarily read on his own, but with school about to end for the year and nothing new being assigned, she knew he was doing just that.

Now, they were on the train heading home with Ron and Ginny where she was sitting beside him, hoping to get a glimpse of what was in the book, but found that the print was too small unless she was either holding the book herself or reading directly over his shoulder. And that was just too obvious, but looking like a better option as time wore on.

"Harry, what are you reading? And why did Madam Pince allow you to take a book over the summer?" Hermione's agitation was obvious to Harry as he looked at her with wide eyes, almost as if he had forgotten she was there. For herself, she had asked Pince before and was told school texts could not be checked out over the summer.

"This didn't come from the library, Hermione. I got it ... elsewhere," he said with a frown. "And it's something I'm going to learn over the summer."

"Harry, you're turning into Hermione with all that reading!" Ron wasn't sure what Harry's problem was. It was like he wanted to do extra work or something. "Why read more than you have to? We have two whole months before we have to even look at a book again!"

Hermione glared at the boy, causing him to cower closer to his sister. "For your information, Ronald, reading happens to be an enjoyable pastime for a lot of people! Furthermore-"

"Sorry, sorry! I just wanted to know why he was reading when he didn't have to!" Hermione huffed as Ron tried to placate her and Harry chuckled.

"Here. You take a look at it, Hermione. I'm going to the loo." He closed it and handed the book to her and walked out of the compartment they were in. Hermione, grinning in a way not reserved for the sane, took the book and curled into the corner where Harry had sat, the warmth left from his body leaving a soothing feeling like when she read by the fireplace at her home den.

Hermione opened the book to the first page to see what it was titled or if it would give a brief description and found that, entitled 'Mind Magicks', and the letter from Gringotts, stuck to the inside cover. Curiosity spinning, she read that first before going through the book itself.

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Harry entered the loo and turned to close the door, locking it from anyone who may have come in, remembering a rather spirited attempt after his fifth year that he still felt too embarrassed to tell anyone about, and when he turned around, he saw Lora there, smiling brightly at him.

"Hiya Harry!" She chirruped. Harry looked at her for a few seconds and blinked before he hopped backwards, hitting the door with a thump and let out a surprised yelp.

"Ah!" He looked around frantically, checking himself over to see if he had any stab wounds or if he was bleeding from anywhere. "What? Why are you here? Did I die again?"

Lora snorted before sitting on the toilet seat, leaving him to stand. "No, you didn't die. If you did, I certainly wouldn't have been smiling," she looked at him with a penetrating gaze, making him shudder lightly, but unable to look away.

"So ... What's up?" He asked nervously.

"You're off to a good start. You haven't really changed too much yet, which is good. I do have a few things I'd like to mention and then I'll be on my way." When he nodded, still looking highly confused, she began.

"Alrighty. Now, I'm here as part of the contract. Remember when I told you that you would be getting guidance from us? Well, this is it. I've called in a few favors and cashed in a few IOU's from some poker games," she looked sharply at Harry and began speaking in a nearly frightening voice. "Don't ever play poker with rules of 'once the clothes are gone, you start getting favors'..." she shuddered. "You'll regret it." As Harry was processing that, and only just about to get to the point all teenage-minded males would go, she spoke again in her previously chipper voice.

"Anyway, you'll want to decide on if you're going to try and rely on your information of the future, which I don't suggest as the smallest things, including your emancipation are going to change, or start over from the beginning, which I would recommend." Now Harry was most certainly confused, thoughts about possible 'favors' out of his mind.

"Why wouldn't I rely on what I know of what's going to happen?" He asked, thinking that was the whole point of going back in time, just like the original end to his third year with Hermione. Lora sighed, saddened by remembering what happened in the past with just such thoughts.

"Well, think of it this way. Imagine you're in a fight with a death eater and you remember the fight exactly as it happened. Now, say you remember dodging left and dodging the killing curse," as he nodded, she continued, "now, imagine that you dodged left because this particular death eater had a tendency to shoot a little to the side of his opponent and you knew that, but you said something or did something where he wound up fixing it and the next time you fought, he was better and hit you instead." Harry's eyebrows rose as he realized what she was saying.

"You mean I may change something that totally makes things different and if I rely on my knowledge of the future and ignore what's going on now, I may screw it up royally?"

Lora blinked with her eyebrows raised high. "You got that faster than I thought you would-"

"Hey!"

"But yes, that's basically it."

Harry grumbled before nodding and leaning up against the door. "So, probably just learn as much as I can, try to get what horcruxes I can and just take everything as I can. Got you. I can expect fourth year to run about the same, considering old Moldysorts shouldn't hear about what's going on with me since he's going to use this whole year to get the Tri-Wizard tournament rigged."

Lora held up a finger. "Don't assume," she said in a singsong voice.

"Right ... Probably safer that way." Harry grimaced.

Lora nodded. "Correct. Also, you should see about going to the Apothecary in Diagon Alley and try to get some malnourishment potions, or potions that will jumpstart you on a growth spurt and try to live at Potter Manor. It's got a lot of protections that would allow anyone who is underage to practice magic without any problems if you so chose to have them over and for the love of God, get a new wardrobe!" She glared at him as only a woman could. "Just wait until after the summer so your growth spurt won't make it pointless."

Harry nodded and adopted a very serious expression. "I'll take all of that into consideration. Thank you. I do have a question though."

"What's that?" Lora, noticing his expression, became highly intrigued.

"Are you going back now, or do you plan to stay and watch while I pee?" Lora's eyes widened and her face became a furious red before she squeaked and simply disappeared. Harry chuckled and did what he had originally come to do, pleased to have gotten one over on her. It was her own bloody fault for keeping him from his business in the first place, though. It was going to be a lot of fun if he could continue. Meanwhile, Lora was devising plans to get back at him, cackling madly as she wrote plan after plan down. The poor dead soul in front of her kept eying the door and whimpered.



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Harry was mildly annoyed as they pulled into the train station. He had tried twice to get Hermione's attention to get his book back, but she swatted him away each time he tried as if he were an annoying gnat. He had been forced into sitting next to her with his arms crossed over his chest and pouted the whole trip back as she read. It was easily the most bored he had been for a while. He found that he had an odd enjoyment in reading the book compared to usual. Maybe it was because it wasn't being forced onto him? As the train shuddered to a stop, Harry shook Hermione's arm, ignoring her annoyed swatting and finally decided on amused over annoyed.

"Hermione, we're here," Harry announced, rather petulantly. Hermione looked up, shocked that they had made it so far. When she finally looked at the pages she had read through, she found that she was much further than she had thought.

"Oh," she looked around again as if lost. "Erm, okay." She was suddenly very glad that she had dressed in her muggle clothing underneath of her robes.

"I promise, I'll let you borrow it when we get back to Hogwarts or once I've gone through as much as I need to, alright?" Harry assured her. Hermione nodded.

"I saw the letter from Gringotts," Harry mentally smacked himself on the forehead, "and was curious about what you're hoping to find." Hermione was hoping it could be something she could help him with. She would love the opportunity to have something to do during the summer.

"I just realized that I had no idea what my account held," which was true, considering he never even found out in the original timeline, "and felt I should really figure that out."

"Okay. That makes sense." Hermione admitted, thinking it was a reasonable plan.

Harry nodded, an idea suddenly forming in his head.

"Hey, what would you say to helping me out closer to the end of summer? I'm wanting to get some books and would like your help to

get some decent ones and help me get some normal clothes and you always match, so I figured you'd have a lot of better choices than what I would come up with. That, and I have no clue where any decent stores would be or anything."

Hermione's eyebrows rose as he spoke, but felt it would be fun all the same. "Of course! That shouldn't be a problem. I don't do much shopping, but if you don't have problems with it, my parents would likely take us."

Harry nodded as they made their way down the corridor in the trains. "Great! I plan to get a lot done this summer, so I'll write you often so we stay in touch." Harry mentally patted himself on the back as Hermione flashed him a brilliant smile.

The night before, until he had finally fallen asleep, he took the time to think over everything in his past life that had happened and was truly able to see how he had completely missed Hermione and any potential love interest with her. It was like he'd had an epiphany about his feelings like he sometimes had when he got a spell right. And Harry had every intention of playing catch-up this time around. He was not sure whether or not it was actually love in a romantic sense, but knew it would be incredibly easy if he wanted it to be. As they left the train, Harry gave Hermione a loose, one-armed hug.

"Talk to you soon, Hermione." They smiled at each other as Hermione hugged him back and then offered a final goodbye and then rushed towards her parents, who watched the hug with curious gazes. Ron was already gone with the rest of the Weasleys on their way home to get everything ready to take an international portkey to Egypt thanks to having won the wizarding lottery. They didn't have the time to make pleasant goodbyes.

"Get over here, boy!" Vernon's face was a pale pink as his rage was held in check in public. He despised his nephew and being forced to pick him up from his 'freak' school and make him come out of his way just to accommodate the little bastard simply pissed him off.

"When we get back to the house while we're out at dinner, you're going to take care of the garden, then you'll be mowing, then-" Harry tuned Vernon out as they made their way to Privet Drive, already making his own plans for the next day.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he responded automatically, easily falling into the old routine. When they arrived, Dudley and Petunia came bustling out of the door.

"Get inside, boy!" Petunia looked around as if making sure no one could see them, odd as it was. Harry briefly wondered why they continued telling people he went to St. Brutus' when anyone could see his school trunk and realize it certainly was not where he had been.

As soon as the Dursleys were out of the house, Harry made his way upstairs to his room and quickly began to forge a fake letter from Gringotts to explain why he wasn't doing his chores and began working on his homework. Had he known forging fake Gringotts letters was illegal, he probably would have gone a different route, but it suited his purposes and would be destroyed soon enough.

Three hours later when the Dursleys showed up, Harry had made it through Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration and Charms and was halfway through Defense Against the Dark Arts when Vernon burst through his door.

"Boy! Why didn't you do your chores!" Rather than speak, he handed the forged letter to Vernon who took it warily. Almost as if fearing it would bite him.

Mr Potter,

Your request to emancipate yourself so that you may leave your "normal relatives at peace and get out of their lives", as you put it, is in process. We will send a representative to you soon to offer you the paperwork and we will then submit it.

Please understand that your request was asked with the express notice of not asking for money, shelter or any other staples from your relatives. Due to this, once the paperwork is signed and completed, you will have one hour to vacate their residence before you will be trespassing and they are under absolutely no obligation to offer you anything. Should they approve of this and sign off on it, then you will have no choice but to abide by that decision. Please understand that this means any obligations, legal and financial, are your sole responsibility, Mr Potter.

If we do not arrive at some point of the day you receive this letter, please find some method of coming to Gringotts to put all paperwork through.

Griphook,

Gringotts Legal Department

Harry watched Vernon very carefully as he read over the faux letter and was very pleased when he saw a slight smirk slowly turn into a full-blown grin that threatened to break his face in two.

"My original plan was to surprise you guys and let you know that I was leaving, but apparently, there's paperwork that I need to fill out and you may have to sign it also. As you can see," Harry pointed at the paper, hoping to hide his nervousness, "I've already made sure you won't have to worry about giving me any money or anything else, really, and you won't have anything left to do with me because there won't be anything I can do to come back and hit you guys up for. But that bit where it said that they may be showing up tonight is why I didn't do the chores. If I didn't have to get ready for the whole official thing, then whoever came here would leave as quickly as possible since I know you don't want to risk the neighbors seeing anything freak-related." Vernon smiled widely as he read the bits over he was most fond of; the whole thing.

"If this works out, then we'll call it square, boy. If it doesn't, then expect to be worked hard to make up for your slack," he growled before throwing the paper on the bed and leaving. Harry shook his head and smiled as he walked over to Hedwig's cage and petted his familiar.

"It seems things are working out well so far, girl. Why don't you hunt for the night while I finish up my homework. With my knowledge, I'm breezing through this stuff like crazy." Hedwig hooted gently as Harry opened the window for her to escape from.

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Dan and Emma Granger listened as Hermione told them about her year at Hogwarts, much of it being what she had already told them in her letters. Both were listening, somewhat in fear and somewhat in awe as she spoke of the year she'd had. By the time she had

caught them up to everything, they were already finished with their dinner and were halfway home.

"So, Harry killed a giant snake and saved that Ginny girl?" Emma watched her daughter nod before asking the follow-up question. "And that's the boy who you got off the train with?"

"Yes. He was asking if I thought that I might be able to help him pick out some new clothes at the end of summer and get a few books and such." Emma and Dan shared a look of amusement as Hermione seemed to blush lightly.

"Well, I don't think that would be a problem," Dan began, "though I'm surprised he'd want your help rather than his family's. So long as he gives us enough warning to get ready and is willing to work around whatever we may have scheduled if it's important, I'd be okay with it."

"Oh, Harry isn't the type to put people out of their way," Hermione assured them. "If he hadn't asked himself, I would say he would worry about being a bother, actually. He said he plans on writing to me fairly often this summer and would let me know when he wanted to go out and do some shopping."

"Well, we'll see what we can do for the boy when the time comes. For now, tell us more about your classes. You told us in a letter that you get to choose new ones next year, right?" Emma chuckled as she saw her daughter nod enthusiastically.

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[Author's Notes: Final:] - Hidy. Just a bit of forewarning and miscellaneous info.

The next chapter is my "About" chapter and is purely about the basics of this story (take a look for details.)

The next STORY chapter (Chapter 3) is going to be Harry's trip to Gringotts and the rest of the summer and then finally, the excursion with Hermione. I plan on picking the pace up quite a bit on that chapter and the one after it. It will be basically random info and Harry's holdings with Gringotts. Chapter 4 will be running story, again.

## Chapter2 – Freedom

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key:"Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - A good portion of the summer is going to be VERY bland, and quite frankly, the same thing over and over again for the summer, so I'll recap it once I get to that bit when you get there. This chapter is simply Harry's trip to Gringotts and resulting emancipation, some info on what he has and such, and getting to his new home with some final letters between Harry and Hermione at the end. While it CAN be skipped, there are a few small bits that make reading it worth while. And lastly, the trip with Hermione in both the magical world and muggle will be the start of next chapter, along with the return to Hogwarts and a few bits with Lora thrown in randomly throughout.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Quantum Leap" by Seel'vor (H/Hr)

xXx PREVIOUSLY xXx

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"It seems things are working out well so far, girl."

xXx STORY xXx

Harry awoke early the next morning since he was still used to getting up for classes and went downstairs, only to see that Dudley and Vernon were still asleep and Petunia was currently making breakfast. As he entered the kitchen, Petunia scowled at him.

"Aunt Petunia, did Vernon tell you about what I was trying to-"

"Yes, idiot child! We tell each other everything, of course! Vernon took the day off to make sure he would be here for this, so get out of here and make sure your 'freak' friends don't come around our house!" She began furiously scrubbing the counter with her towel, ignoring or not caring that she was using the dirty bit of the towel.

Harry merely nodded and went upstairs to take a shower and then read a little more of the book left to him about the power-limiting seal. At five minutes after eight, Harry dressed into his robes, grabbed his wand and the paper sent to him from Gringotts. Looking around to see if he missed anything, he finally decided he was ready.

"Well, let's get this started."

Harry tapped his wand to the parchment and felt the expected tug behind his navel. He found himself flailing around in a technicolor stream of lights before landing roughly on his bum with an 'oomph'. Looking around, he got up and rubbed his aching backside. He saw a relatively closed off area that was well-lit with a large gold inlay on the stone floor with the Gringotts seal dominant and some kind of runic structure surrounding it. 'Those are cool. I wonder what they're for.' His musings were interrupted by a heavy wooden door opening and a familiar goblin entering.

"Oh. Hello Griphook." The goblin raised an eyebrow at Harry and motioned him towards the door.

"Good morning, Mister Potter. If you'll come this way, we will begin the meeting you've requested." Harry walked with Griphook out of the room and down a winding series of stone hallways, several of which he couldn't help but think he was purposefully led down several times to keep him from memorizing the route.

"Griphook, if you don't mind my asking, where are we?" Harry asked, sure he had just passed the same hallway for the third time.

Griphook considered him a few moments before actually responding with only a slight hesitation. "Well, Mister Potter ... We are deep underneath of Gringotts in its vast network of catacombs. As stated in the letter sent to you, we almost never use the portkey arrival point given to you and it is because of being in the bowels of the Gringotts' inner networks among other sensitive reasons. I'm afraid I do not have the authority to tell you more than this."

Harry simply nodded, actually happy to have received more of an answer than he expected. "That's okay, Griphook. I asked expecting the answer to be much less, just in case of something like that or security and was only curious. Thank you for what you could give me anyway."

While Griphook frowned slightly as he tried to figure out the actions of the wizard next to him, Harry was thanking Lora and whatever deities that had sent him back with his knowledge from his past life. He had learned towards the end, when he had to deal a bit more with goblins when dealing with Sirius' and Dumbledore's wills that goblins reacted very well to respect and honor and were disgusted by anything that showed weakness or vulnerability. Simply treating them as he wanted them to treat him without cowing before them had gained him the ear of the goblins whenever he dealt with them. The only exception seemed to be death of a loved one. He hoped to start that much earlier and possibly with a stronger bond this time around.

After several minutes of walking in silence, they finally came to a large, wooden set of double doors with heavy silver and gold handles. The Gringotts seal was etched into each. Harry noticed that



the seal appeared to be identical to the one in the portkey room, but somehow seemed different. Griphook didn't even pause as he opened the doors and ushered Harry inside and to a seat at the edge of a long table.

"Senior Advisor and Head of Accounts Management Fangstone will be by momentarily. I will remain with you throughout the proceedings. Do you require any drink?"

"No, thank you." Griphook nodded and almost immediately, a slightly taller goblin walked in with two attendants who were carrying several scrolls and parchments each. When the goblin entered, Griphook immediately stood at attention and then bowed. Harry, seeing this, decided to imitate him by standing from his chair and bowing as well, obviously using Griphook as his guide since he was looking slightly to the side to see if he matched postures and was waiting for a sign of when to rise. Fangstone raised an eyebrow and found himself equally as amused as shocked at the young wizard's actions. Wizards did not tend to show goblins respect or believe them to be anything more than animals, but this one it seemed, had yet to learn of that facet of wizarding society.

"You may rise," he said, moving to the head of the table. "My name is Senior Advisor Fangstone, Mister Potter, Head of Accounts Management. We have taken the liberty of getting each of the files you have requested of us in relation to your parents' will, a transaction summary of your holdings since your parents' deaths, your full account holdings, emancipation paperwork and a few things we thought you may wish to know about in hopes of anticipating what you would ask about." Harry nodded, already knowing that from the letter.

"Thank you. May we first start with my parents' will?" Fangstone nodded while pulling out the scroll in question. "Also, could you please call me 'Harry'?"

"As you wish, Harry. I must ask, however, why your guardians haven't come with you." Fangstone watched intently as Harry frowned and seemed to think before answering.

"Well, that was actually part of why I wanted to see my parents' will. You see, I live with my aunt from my mother's side and her husband and son. They despise magic though and, in turn, despise me. I trust

you can understand the reference when I say that, minus the magic, I was treated about like one of the Malfoy house elves." Harry noticed the goblin's eyes widen slightly and could feel Griphook shift beside him.

"Ah, I see you do understand. Needless to say, I didn't want to bring them, especially where they may learn I've got money that they would certainly try to take from me. I've also learned that I had a godfather, Sirius Black, and that I was supposed to be with him, but that it wasn't done because Albus Dumbledore put me there and that Sirius was put into Azkaban without a trial or questioning or anything. I want to try and find out about all of that and I was thinking about what I might do after school when I realized that I had no clue what I can do financially or anything." He shrugged as the goblins looked worried.

"You are saying, Mister Potter, than you live with your aunt Petunia?" Harry furrowed his brow in honest confusion as Fangstone questioned him, ignoring that they weren't going to call him by his first name.

"Yes; how did you know her name?" He noticed a very slight wince from the goblin as he unfurled the will.

"To sum up your parents' will, it says everything is to go to you with a stipend account to help take care of you and gives several options for where you should be placed should the worst happen to both of your parents, with Mister Black being the primary guardian. It also states, specifically, that you should never go to your mother's sister, Petunia Evans turned Petunia Dursley, the Malfoy family, Nott family, Greengrass family or any others that have been suspected to have been Death Eaters without direct questioning under veritaserum or magical oath of innocence. It then goes on to state the specifics of how your accounts should be handled until you were able to take over control." Harry quickly read through the will and found that it did say very much the same thing he was just told, albeit with words he wasn't sure he'd ever use in normal conversation.

"What's this bit here about a magical guardian?" Harry remembered Lora saying something of the same name from the book she had given him, but nothing in it was about law. It was something about animals, where this certainly wasn't. He was slightly worried he'd done something wrong when Fangstone seemed to become upset.

"For those who live in both realms, the muggle and wizarding, a child will have a guardian for each, unless those, such as muggleborn children, have natural guardians, or parents. Simply put, your magical guardian handles your legal magical needs while your guardian would be the one to handle any other issues you have. In the magical world, a magical guardian is usually assigned by the parents within their wills. If not, then the current headmaster of Hogwarts will generally take that roll as they do while you are within the school unless you already have a magical guardian, which should have been Mister Black, the Longbottoms or the Bones in your case." Fangstone frowned as he looked at the will.

"However, it would seem the executioner of your will, Mister Dumbledore, has neglected the will and placed you with his own choice of muggle guardian. I have a parchment that states he had you placed there, but not explaining his reasoning which is required, so I will make sure we look into that-" Suddenly, Harry began to panic. He really didn't want Dumbledore to know what he was up to quite yet.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt, but I actually know why he did it, but I have to say that it isn't worth it."

"What do you mean, Mister Potter?" Fangstone was quite curious, enough so that he was willing to forgive Harry's interrupting him. He was far more polite than most anyway. At least this human spoke with them rather than at them and didn't simply order them about like household pets.

Harry frowned and took a few seconds to decide what he wanted to do. "Before I explain, may I ask a few questions?" Intrigued, Fangstone merely nodded. "Thank you. First, does my account currently have someone to manage it?" He asked, already knowing it didn't.

"No. Due to the restrictions placed in the beginning to make sure nothing unfortunate happened, the account was placed into an automated system of deposits and withdrawals to maintain account integrity and nothing more. All of your guardians are capable of working with only your trust fund, however, unless they can prove that something immediate must be done with another for some valid reason." Harry nodded.

"Thank you. Now, while I can see needing to alert the Ministry to some aspects of our business today, is there anything that we speak about that could be kept within the confidence of myself and Gringotts?" Now very highly intrigued, Fangstone motioned for the others to leave, Griphook only staying at Harry's motion to stay.

"I cannot guarantee that anything we speak about will not be discussed with our leaders where appropriate, but I can assure you that we will not alert those who needn't hear of it, so long as it isn't anything illegal or in some way harmful to the goblin nation." Harry looked Fangstone in the eye the entire time he spoke, slightly unnerving the older goblin. Harry wasn't sure exactly why he wanted to tell them this information, but he felt compelled to let them know a little about what was going on, even if not specifically anything related to his time travel.

"While nothing I speak of is in any way harmful to the goblins directly, the results of this information could be later on down the line. You see, a little before I was born, a prophecy was created that basically said I would be the one to fight Voldemort and would be the only one who could defeat him, though it also doesn't specifically say that I will." Harry took a moment to take in the completely gobsmacked expressions before continuing.

"Dumbledore knows about the prophecy, though he doesn't know that I know it, and that is why he put me with my aunt. He said that he put some kind of blood protections around my house that were based on my mother's blood and her sacrifice to save me as a child. They may have protected me from Death Eaters, but they didn't protect me from my uncle Vernon or cousin Dudley, which is why I want the emancipation." He paused a moment and looked thoughtful as the two goblins in front of him tried to take everything in. "Though, I suppose that not being held under that age restriction for magic would be nice also." Fangstone and Griphook shifted to ease their discomfort at what they had just learned.

"You are saying, Mister Potter, that Dumbledore placed you in your aunt's care specifically for the sake of a protection from dark wizards, but were severely mistreated by your guardians?"

Harry nodded. "Yup."

Fangstone sighed and grabbed a thin stack of parchment from the table and slid it towards Harry while speaking. "And you would be willing to testify to the home life you have had?" Harry simply nodded as he began to read the paperwork.

"Very well. Then this is the emancipation paperwork you requested. You've got the funds and are of an age where this can be done legally and, if the Dursleys were to sign it, then there would be nothing that Dumbledore, or anyone else, can do about it unless you prove to be unfit for emancipation. We'll be sure to push this through private channels to make sure this encounters as little resistance as possible. You will simply need the Dursleys to sign this in the places you've left for them. Once you do, the paperwork will disappear and you will receive a confirmation owl within minutes advising you if it was approved or rejected. If they refuse to sign it, you can elect to mark the second option on page twenty-one and run the risk of it failing or being contested at a later date." Fangstone explained.

"Thanks!" Harry smiled as he signed on the indicated spaces as he read through the paperwork. After several minutes of reading and signing, he slid the completed forms to Fangstone, who handed them to Griphook to double check. They were dealing with a child, after all, who sometimes overlooked the obvious.

"Your holdings with us are actually four-fold," Fangstone said as he slid a folder towards Harry. As Harry opened it, his jaw dropped.

Holdings of Harry James Potter:

Vault 687 – Trust Fund

916 Galleons

0 Sickles

0 Knuts

Interest rate: 0% - Supplementary only. To be reset to 1,000 galleons every August 1st and used for anything necessary for Harry and his upbringing.

Items: None

Security: 3

Chamber 23 – Potter Family Vault

169,925,183 Galleons

4 Sickles

28 Knuts

Interest rate: 0% - Return on Investments (See investments section of portfolio)

Items: Numerous – Listed in separate folder within Chamber

Property: Multiple – See combined list

Security: 30

Chamber 9 – Gryffindor/Ravenclaw Family Vault

82 Galleons

2 Sickles

13 Knuts

Interest rate: 0% - Supplementary

Items: Numerous – Listed in separate folder within Chamber

Property: None – Combined with Potter family at family merger per Gryffindor line

Security: 27

Chamber 10 – Slytherin/Hufflepuff Family Vault

291 Galleons

2 Sickles

38 Knuts

Interest rate: 0% - Supplementary

Items: None

Property: 2 – Gaunt Residence, Pure Life Cemetery

Security: 30

Trust Fund, only, is accessible by the account holder's guardians and account holder until Harry Potter is the age of majority. Guardians include:

Muggle Guardian(s): Petunia Evans-Dursley and Vernon Dursley

Magical Guardian(s): Albus Dumbledore

Harry was incredibly shocked to see that the founders had been married to each other. He always knew they were friends, but thinking it over, he realized that there was never anything in their texts or as myth that they had never had any romantic interests, but it was widely known that they had legal blood heirs.

'How in the hell could anyone have missed THAT!' His eyebrow twitched as he thought about it before he realized that all four founders were on the paper. Maybe he would have to finally take Hermione up on her offer and actually read 'Hogwarts: A History'.

"Um, I know the Potters are heirs of Gryffindor, but I honestly didn't know about Ravenclaw. And I had no clue whatsoever that Slytherin and Hufflepuff were together. But, when and how am I related to them?" Fangstone chuckled at Harry's bewildered expression as he motioned the paper in his hands.

"I don't understand the whole situation, but I believe that Slytherin had a grandson who was believed to be a squib and ran away before his family could kill him for polluting their bloodline." Fangstone smiled toothily at Harry before continuing. "In truth, I believe he turned out to be quite the powerful wizard. He had a chaotic core that kept him from being able to use magic, or even give constant results when tested, so he was ostracized from his family until he learned to control it much later. I believe there is a

genealogy tome in your vault that gives more information, but the connection is on your mother's side, if I recall correctly. It was quite the interesting experience when she came in to be added to your father's vaults and was discovered." Harry was in shock. He was truly an heir of all four founders, then. All of his second year, it would seem, everyone was correct.

"I can't believe I'm an heir of all of them," he whispered as he stared off into space for a few moments. When Fangstone cleared his throat, Harry shook his head to clear it. "Erm, what does this actually mean? Being an heir of all of them, that is."

"Not much, actually. Hogwarts Castle may be yours, as it belonged to the Ravenclaw line, but was built upon by each of the contributing founders and permission given to the Ministry to continue using it as a school after they passed on, though I'm unsure of the exact details. Any specifics would have to be found within your vaults in any records that may exist there. Other than that, their vaults didn't hold much money, especially when you consider the economy at the time, and sadly, the Slytherin vault was emptied of all items before the first rise of Voldemort," Fangstone said. He and the rest of the goblins didn't normally speak his name, but if some twelve-year old was going to do it without flinching right in front of him, he wasn't about to do any less. They didn't fear the man, but they felt hot rage when he was brought up for all those his minions had killed and all that lost revenue. Even goblins didn't enjoy paperwork.

"Yea, that was actually by Voldemort. His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle, last of the Gaunt line, who were also descendants of Slytherin." Harry's flippant explanation while looking over his property listings nearly caused the aged goblin in front of him to choke on absolutely nothing as he refrained from roaring in anger.

"The Ministry looked for several years to try and figure out who he was, Mister Potter. How did you come across this information?" Fangstone asked in a barely controlled voice. Harry looked up to see Fangstone eying him with a rather critical eye, making him slightly uncomfortable.

"Well, if you look him up, and after you learn about some of the past students, you'd see the connection. The name "Voldemort" is actually an ana-an," he fumbled over the words purposefully to make it appear he wasn't quite as familiar with it as he should be,



"anagram, I think, of his real name. 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' can be rearranged to say 'I am Lord Voldemort'." As Griphook handed the paperwork back to Fangstone with a nod showing it was completed so far, Fangstone decided to leave it alone, knowing that nothing would come of it for now. Later, however, was a different story.

"Your emancipation paperwork is completed on your side, but the guardians you were left to by Dumbledore's orders will need to sign it. Once they do, the paperwork will disappear and within a few minutes, you should receive an owl that either confirms or denies your emancipation, the latter of which isn't likely to happen." Harry's eyes were wide.

"Does it normally happen so quickly?" Harry was thinking of all the different kids out there who would want to run away whenever their parents did something the child didn't like trying to do what he had just done.

"Not normally, no. But, you are Harry Potter and there are several who would not like to see you moving about freely. Also, it would be a very big bit of news and our clients' confidentiality is one of our highest priorities. We will move the request through private, but fully legal, channels so that it can not be contested until it is too late. Doing so, it goes directly to the department needed in the Ministry to be finished by one of our representatives. It shouldn't be until you do something on your own or someone specifically looks into your legal status that anyone will find out." Harry grinned widely as he received the information.

"That's incredible! Thank you very much!" Harry exclaimed happily. Fangstone nodded.

"This means that you will have all rights and responsibilities of an adult in both the wizarding world and the muggle world. Once this is through, you will have full access to your vaults. We highly recommend allowing us to offer you an accounts manager or, if you feel you'd be more comfortable not having a goblin handle your account, you could get a wizarding consultant."

"Actually, that was why I wanted Griphook to remain when you dismissed the other two. I was hoping," he turned to the wide-eyed Griphook as he continued, "and feel free to decline if you don't want to but, I was hoping that you'd be willing to manage my account and

answer questions for me when I come in and such." Both goblins looked at Harry in absolute shock. What he was asking for was, quite frankly, unheard of. Griphook just went from one of the lowest tiers in Gringotts as a simple teller to managing one of the largest five accounts they had. Wizards, more and more often in recent years, have had a growing distrust of goblins. That he would offer to entrust his account to one was something that hadn't happened in almost three decades.

"Y-yes, Mister Potter! I would be honored to accept the position!"

"Excellent! I already know that my aunt and uncle will sign this, so I do have a question. Can I get a way to pay for things in the magical world and the muggle? I will need to buy a few things in the muggle world soon and would like to not have to carry around a large amount of money." Harry already knew that what he wanted was available, but didn't want to seem to knowledgeable about them. That, and he wasn't totally sure when they were created.

"We have a card that works just like a muggle credit card in the muggle society and needs only to be tapped with a wand on our seal for the magical community, which will create a registry of items and costs to be signed off on and has a transaction cost of five knuts. It will work with your trust fund until you become emancipated. Then, we'll simply add your trust fund into your family vault. We have banks in the muggle world that act as fronts so that we may support anyone who moves about in that world." Harry nodded as Fangstone spoke until he got towards the end.

"Actually, I'd like to keep my trust fund, if I could. Also, once I'm emancipated, I want everyone but myself off of the vaults and add Hermione Jane Granger, a muggleborn witch, to the trust fund and give her a card like my own if you could." Fangstone discretely wriggled his fingers, casting a nonverbal detection spell to look for any mind control spells and love potions. Getting an immediate negative response, he nodded.

"As you wish, we can do so. But you are aware that she could empty the vault out at any moment, yes?" Fangstone asked. Harry nodded as he answered.

"I do. But I wouldn't have done this if I didn't trust her. I'm doing this because I have something I'm going to get her for Christmas and

want her to be able to use a little of the money for what I'm getting her because it will help me out as much as her with the books I know she'll get." Harry's infectious grin got the two goblins to smirk themselves, though the goblins saw it as a predatory action of a male chasing his mate and thought nothing of warning Harry of what those in the wizarding world would see such an action as the first time the girl attempted to use the card, before Griphook took over.

"As I'll be your account manager, I'll be sure to send her the card as soon as your emancipation goes through. We can do nothing until it does in that regard as you don't have authorization to do so."

"I understand. Thank you," Harry said with a smile. He knew advancing Griphook to an account manager position as he had was unorthodox, but it ingratiated the goblin to Harry for almost no risk. As an account manager, he handled basic bank administrivia to allow various transactions that Harry oversaw and warn the owner of potential problems with either the account, or its investments that could spell disaster for the bank or the account as a whole. And since Griphook was now in a position to make a lot more gold than he had been and was now a more important goblin within the bank, he would be extremely motivated to perform well and assist Harry with anything he needed, which had been the point from the beginning. He needed a helpful set of eyes and ears within the bank for when he needed information. With such a low risk-factor if Griphook should fail, he gained a potentially competent and extremely loyal employee.

Griphook nodded and then got up and left to get Harry his card while Fangstone continued.

"In summation, if you can get your current guardians to sign the paperwork, you will be free of the underage magic restriction and have access to your full holdings with the changes you requested made. Other than that, we've addressed all other things you've asked about and we haven't needed to discuss any of the things we've brought with us. Do you have any other questions?"

"Actually, yes. I was hoping to begin living at Potter Manor since I saw it on the list of properties you gave me. Would that be allowed?" Harry asked, remembering Lora's orders. Fangstone nodded once and gathered up all of his paperwork aside from the holdings statement and handed Harry a small box as he replied.

"The properties are yours to do with as you please, so long as your emancipation goes through. Within this box, you'll find the Potter, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw signet rings. If you put them all onto your finger, they will merge into one, showing only the one you wish to show or breaking apart to show you whichever ones you wish to be seen and are charmed to offer a direct link to up-to-date legal information when called upon. It's one of the methods that purebloods developed to stay up-to-date with the changes in the government since they are the only ones with such rings. By being a blood heir to any of the founders, in this case all of them, you also have an automatic pureblood status in our current government, which grants you the same perks that they enjoy and gives you the same abilities as they have, even though you are technically a halfblood since your mother was born to a squib and muggle." Fangstone decided not to mention that the rings had a chance of not accepting the boy, waiting to see the reactions of the old magic, first.

Wide-eyed, Harry opened the box and saw all five rings, each with their own coat of arms. The founder rings were just like the ones from school while the Potter signet ring appeared to be a wand, sword and shield. Placing them on his right ring finger, they flashed and formed into one ring showing the Potter insignia. Fangstone smirked as he saw each ring accept him as their master. This boy, who showed none of the bigotry of most wizards in office, would grow to be a powerful ally.

"Wicked," Harry said with a huge grin. He was going to make Dumbledore regret keeping him from all of this in his past several lives. These rings alone would have saved him during his trial before his fifth year started. And if there was a repeat of everything with Skeeter during fourth year, he would be more than ready to teach the woman a lesson. Even now, as the thoughts of those situations arose, the rings provided him with the information to crush his enemies and somehow offered the ability to go a step further and tell him how to get the most out of them.

"The Potter signet ring actually works as an emergency portkey to the very residence you were requesting. You merely have to command it to take you there, which it will allow for yourself and whomever you are touching or is touching you, as most family rings will. It, like all Old Family rings, has a form of minor sentience in

such a way that it has a mental connection to the wearer, so long as he is a Potter by blood and male, as the Potters, much like other Old Blood families, were patriarchal, unless you decide to change such a thing in the future. It's this same sentience that gives you the legal information when requested from you or given to you when a situation arrives where it is needed if it senses itself capable of assisting you."

As Harry was looking at the ring, Griphook walked in and handed Harry a shiny black card that had the Gringotts seal in the upper right corner in gold with Harry's name in silver along the bottom and the Potter coat of arms in the upper-left hand corner.

"It has got a mild charm embedded into the card by use of runes written below the black cover that will cause anyone you give it to to accept it as a standard muggle credit card. We have connections to all of the muggle financial institutions in the world, so anywhere you use it will accept it," Griphook advised. Harry nodded as he put it into his makeshift wallet. They quickly finished their business and Griphook walked Harry back to the portkey chamber where he made sure to have the emancipation paperwork in his pocket and tapped the letter a final time to return to his bedroom, nearly an hour and a half after he had left, falling flat on his arse.

"I have got to get the hang of that," he grumbled as he got up. His first step was to get downstairs and get through his next bit of acting with as little trouble as possible.

"Uncle Vernon," he said, coming into the living room. "We're all only a few signatures away from never seeing each other again." Harry let the paperwork fall onto the table in front of his now smiling uncle.

"I've never been more happy to see you, boy!" Vernon looked over the pages quickly, quickly enough to make Harry wonder if he was even actually reading, before signing on each of the glowing spaces that indicated his name. He didn't even balk at the 'unnatural' paper or the quill Harry had given him to write with. Even when the glowing spaces stopped glowing with his name, he was still smiling dumbly.

"Petunia! Get in here and sign the freak's paper! We'll truly be rid of him! We don't even have to give him money to support himself!" Vernon was all but bouncing in his seat as Petunia came in, wiping her hands with a towel.

'I wonder if she was in there the whole time I was gone,' Harry thought as she looked over the paperwork skeptically.

"This is serious? And we don't have to give him anything?" Petunia was actually unsure about all of this. Harry had just shown up on their doorstep one morning with nothing but a basket and a letter, which said that the followers of the mad man that killed her sister were after Harry. But if they were still after him, then Harry surely would not have been able to be allowed to go out on his own like this, right?

"You bet your sweet buns it is!" Harry couldn't stop the shiver of revulsion that raced down his spine at Vernon's blunt confirmation. "The freak's papers basically say that this waives us of all responsibilities of him and that we're free and clear!" In truth, Vernon only read a few words on each paper, just so he could say he had read it. He had no real clue what it said, but he knew what emancipation would mean to them, even if it was all about those unnatural people. Petunia frowned slightly at the quill, but took it and signed on each glowing rectangle. As she lifted the quill from the last page, the parchments rolled up and lifted into the air before disappearing with a quiet flash of light, shocking the two Dursleys.

"What the hell was that, boy," Vernon growled out dangerously. Harry just shook his head and raised a hand in a calming gesture.

"That was the magic contained in the contract to send it where it needed to go. I should have an answer soon of if it went through or not. After that, I'll write a letter, get my things together and be out of here for good."

Vernon hopped up and punched his fist into the air with a whoop. "Wonderful! We'll be rid of the boy and not have to worry about any of those freaks showing up ever again!" His cheering was cut off as an owl flew in through the fireplace and landed on Harry's shoulder, holding its leg out with a letter addressed to him.

"Thank you," he said as he untied it. As soon as it was relieved of its burden, the owl flew back up the chimney.

"Wasn't the chimney grate closed," Petunia mumbled, more to herself than the others.

Lord Potter,

It pleases us at the Ministry of Magic and our associates at Gringotts Wizarding Bank to inform you that you are now officially emancipated and are henceforth exempt from all underage restrictions placed upon you. As of the moment you receive this letter, you are considered an adult in both the magical and muggle communities in all situations legal and personal.

This means any legal situations you come across, finances, use of magic and means of supporting yourself fall fully unto yourself. Please take these things into consideration, because anything you do will now be looked at as an adult unless you prove yourself to be incapable of maintaining your emancipation, at which point a suitable family will be found for you as your new guardians and a suitable punishment would be found at that point if necessary.

Please note that you will be unable to take your hereditary seat in the Wizengamot until you are seventeen years of age as you are still within school. The only time in which you may take your seat is for any laws or legal proceedings in which the full and active Wizengamot must be present or if you should happen to find someone to sit in your seat for you as your voice. If you choose to go this route, we ask that you make your choice with care as they have full empowerment to make whatever decisions they choose as if they were yours.

However, as Lord Potter, you are eligible for only one seat, rather than Potter, Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff combined without taking a wife for each line to allow it to continue. Please keep this in mind.

This request for emancipation was put through on private channels. While this is legal, please note that it means that very few are notified of your new legal status and sworn to secrecy while the information is not public knowledge. As such, you should remember to exercise caution while using magic. Though you are no longer held under the restrictions for underage magic, and the charm held on your wand is already deactivated from our tracking systems, no one is exempt from the Statute of Secrecy.

Sincerely,

Darren Woughen, Ministry of Magic

Harry smiled brilliantly as he finished the letter. However, with the bit mentioning his seat in the Wizengamot, he felt it would be a bad idea to allow Vernon to read it, so he merely rolled it up and looked at Vernon.

"I'll write my letter and be out of your hair in the hour." He turned and quickly ran up the stairs to his room for the last time. With a rather large grin, he grabbed a fresh parchment and dipped the quill to write Hermione a letter.

Heya Hermione!

Good news! I'm emancipated! I'll explain more, but I've got a few things I need to get done this summer, so I'll tell you when we meet again near the end of the summer break. I don't want to say too much in the letter.

I'm sorry to say, but no one will be able to find me until I make myself known to you later on. You'd be surprised at how good I am at not being found when I don't want to be. Anyway, I will be sending Hedwig to you with letters, though, so don't worry about that. I plan on responding to each one you end up sending either the day I get it or the day after unless I wear myself out.

I have plenty of money, some houses and such, so don't worry about what I'll do or where I'll go or anything. Also, please don't tell anyone about this, yet. I don't want anyone, not even Ron since he's currently in Egypt, to know yet. Just you and your parents if you'd like.

I'll write you in a few days,

Love

Harry

PS: I've already finished my homework! Ha! But... um... seriously... I'm sending them with this to.. ah.. Could you look them over for me? (Puppy-dog look) Don't correct them! But just look them over and tell me what you think? Also, I won't be available for a few hours,



so could you please let Hedwig get some sleep while she's there? You can reply later tonight if you don't have any problems with it.

Harry quickly rolled up the parchment and went to wake up Hedwig, only to see her already eying him.

"Hey girl. Do you mind delivering this to Hermione and maybe resting there tonight? I'm going to be making my way to our new home and I don't want you to have to fly around randomly. Once we move in, then you'll be able to fly about freely and we don't have to worry about the Dursleys anymore." Hedwig hooted softly, slightly tired since it was nearing her own resting time. Accepting the letter, she flew out while Harry put the last of his things into his trunk before heading out.

xXxXxXx

Hermione was in the middle of revising her Transfiguration essay when a beautiful, snowy-white owl began to scratch at her bedroom window.

"Hello Hedwig! What did Harry have to say today, hmm?" After she took the letter, Hedwig flew to her headboard and shuffled herself until she was comfortable and began to doze. Hermione read Harry's letter, shocked that he had emancipated himself and unsure if she should be more shocked about that, or that he'd not only done his homework, but completed it all with only a few hours' worth of time. She briefly wondered what he may be doing that would wear himself out, but decided there were more pressing matters at the moment.

'Okay, important part first,' she thought to herself, only to realize she couldn't decide which was more important. 'Okay, forget important. Let's see how thorough he was with his homework!' With a mental battle cry, she began to forge through his work, only to be amazed at the level of intimacy with the topics discussed. Five extra years of study will tend to make such things child's play, really. At least for second-year material.

Hermione read through each essay twice, looking for any potential errors the first time and then searching her own texts to confirm some of what he had written.

"What in the world was he doing referencing NEWT level Transfiguration?" She threw her quill down with a frown as she finished making her own notes to go over later and thought deeply about Harry's apparent new-found scholarly self and how it was annoying her to no end.

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Harry was thrilled with his shopping spree to this point. He had finished up at Gringotts and confirmed that a new account was created for Hermione from his old trust fund and even managed to hit the apothecary and get a series of potions ordered to reverse all of the affects of the malnourishment he had received much of his life by forcing his body into a growth spurt. It was somewhat expensive, but it was not like he had to worry about money any time soon. The owner of the little shop was a bit worried about selling such a potion to a child, considering they were expensive and dangerous if used improperly, but a few words of encouragement from The-Boy-Who-Lived and promises of a few higher-priced purchases later and he was tripping over himself to be of use. A subtle suggestion of possible endorsements just gave him a discount, sadly.

Now however, he was finished with his purchases and didn't care to get anything else until he was with Hermione, so he looked at his new ring a little dubiously. "Alright, Little Guy. Take me to Potter Manor."

Harry felt a tug behind his navel, signifying the pull of the portkey and he flashed through a technicolor stream of lights before landing on his arse over a very dark, wooden floor.

"Ow," he yelled as he rolled onto his back. "Why do I have to get hurt every bloody time I take one of these things?" He got up and took a quick look around, noticing he was in some kind of receiving room that was about the size of the Dursleys' entire home and held an understated elegance in its furnishings and accessories.

"Dobby," Harry called out, already having planned on this. He was worried about having to clean the home like they had to at Grimmauld Place before his fifth year. It hadn't been lived in and had a house elf residing there. This one had been empty longer and didn't have one.

"Mister Harry Potter, sir?" Dobby asked as he popped in in front of Harry. As he did, he took a quick glance around to see where he was at and sniffed slightly at the dirty house that dared be dusty with his favorite human within it before focusing all of his attention towards Harry. Harry knelt down in front of the house elf and began his prepared speech.

"Dobby, how would you like to be a part of the Potter family?" Ever so slowly, Dobby's eyes widened to the point Harry was ready to reach out and grab them if they fell out of his head and his ears raised until they were straight up and his lower jaw lowered, all at the same, slow pace. It took the next five minutes for Harry to pry the happily-sobbing creature from his leg before meshing out the details.

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Miss Hermione Jane Granger,

Recently, one Mister Harry James Potter has become emancipated and has described his wishes for his holdings with us. As such, the card you have just received, along with this letter, were sent to you at his request and gives you access to a vault that you now have nearly full rights to and may use as you see fit. Currently, only you and Mister Potter have the authority to utilize this vault and only he has the ability to add any others. Your lack of ability to add others is your only restriction.

The card may be used in any muggle or wizarding establishments and has several charms embedded within it by use of runes to ensure it will not be stolen or used by anyone without your permission along with assuring that any muggles would see the card as any normal card to their eyes.

To activate the card and tie it to yourself, you should place the tip of your wand onto the Gringotts seal in the upper-right hand corner and say 'Activate'. You needn't worry about the restrictions on underage magic as this casts nothing but ties it to your magical signature, using your wand as a bridge between that and the card. The Potter Family coat of arms in the upper-left hand corner holds no significance at this point beyond showing who's account the card is tied to and, should the card be taken and the security seals bypassed, it will be sent to the Account's Manager in charge.

Otherwise, by tying it to your magical signature, the card would appear within a pocket on your person should it be called to find its owner.

You will receive no accounting records for this vault as you are not the primary holder unless Mister Potter specifies he would prefer otherwise.

Any further questions should be directed towards Mister Harry Potter or myself.

Griphook,

Account's Manager of the Potter Estate

Gringotts Wizarding Bank

Hermione set the letter she had just received from a rather fierce-looking owl down on her desk and leaned back in her chair with a blank expression on her face. After a few moments of thinking about absolutely nothing, as her mind had been shocked to a standstill, she reached out and ran her fingers gently over the raised Potter insignia and her own name before smiling warmly. This showed a massive amount of trust in her on Harry's side. Suddenly, she decided to set the card before she either lost it or forgot to do it and gave someone else the chance to. She grabbed her wand from the top of her desk and put it firmly on the seal of Gringotts.

"Activate."

She watched in wide-eyed fascination as the entire card blackened further to the point of nearly sucking in the light in the room and an incredibly long series of gold and silver runes began to run down the card from top to bottom for several moments before finally fading and going back to its normal appearance. Hermione blinked the light splotches from her eyes and decided she would ask Harry about that along with the rest of everything that night when she wrote her letter to him and Hedwig was up.

"Just what are you up to," she asked to the letters she had received that day between Harry and Gringotts. She could not understand exactly why Harry was doing so much like this without consulting anyone about it or why he didn't want to explain it in a letter, but she

was sure she would get it out of him when they met up if she couldn't get it from him in a letter sooner.

xXxXxXx

Hello Harry,

First, your homework was perfect! The only errors I found were spelling errors! I'm very impressed. I thought there were some other errors, mainly with your information, but I looked them up and found that it was all accurate. I don't know where you got the information, but I really am impressed. It wasn't that it was all obscure information or anything, it's just that most of it is higher-year information. While I knew a bit of it, I am curious about why you did. You aren't exactly the type for advanced reading.

Also, I thank you for the card from Gringotts, but I can't accept it! It's your money and I can't just go around spending it! When we see each other again, I'll be giving it back. It isn't that I don't appreciate it, but I just can't spend your money like that.

Okay, I've always assumed that you didn't have a great home life and that you didn't like the Dursleys, especially after hearing about the story of when Ron 'rescued' you before last year, but why emancipation? Why move out? And just where did you go, Harry James Potter! If you need somewhere to stay or something, I'm sure I can get my parents to let you stay with us! What did Dumbledore say about this? Did you even ask him if it would be safe to do? I guess what I'm trying to ask is, WHAT WERE YOU THINKING!

Now that I've got that out of my system, I should mention that I'm done with my summer work as well and am going to go over some of the information you've written down. I'm a little curious about what you talked about in regards to transfiguring non-living materials into living materials.

Your friend

Hermione

xXxXxXx

Good day Lady Hermione!

First, I wanna say thanks for looking over my homework. I just wanted to be sure it was fine. I'll tell you all about where I got the information later. There'll be some stuff I want you to read over first. I'll actually send you the book in a few days after I've copied it all down.

Second, the card is your own. The money is yours to do with as you please. Believe me when I tell you that it is merely a fraction of what I have. It's less than one percent of my over all holdings with Gringotts and I trust you. It's only to a trust fund. I still have access to everything else (about sixteen billion pounds where this is only about a hundred thousand.) You and I both know that I don't need to buy your friendship and that I respect you enough to not have to worry about ulterior motives. Simply put, you are my friend, Hermione. I am not just simply giving you the money, I am offering to share it with you to get things you are interested in getting. In regards to books and educational material, I know you'd share those with me if I wanted to look them over.

I'll admit that I've actually got ONE ulterior motive, though. In the case that I need to get something, but can't for whatever reason, then you could if you're going in that direction. While I don't see that happening, at least we're covered if it is needed.

As to what I was thinking, and I apologize for how this will sound in advance, but I was thinking I wanted absolutely nothing more to do with the Dursleys than I needed to, which is nothing. I refuse to write anything down, but all you need to know is that I may very well have taken some rather regrettable actions. I'm not talking about killing them, but I assure you, I had access, even with only my trust fund, to do basically anything I chose.

Lack of a good home life is like saying I was worshiped by the Dursleys. I am gone from them and will have absolutely nothing more to do with them. Yes, Dumbledore will be upset when he finds out, but for his own reasons. Not for my own well-being. I can't explain in this letter, and he'd do just about anything to figure out how I found out. I'll tell you later, I suppose, but please don't ask me.

I've actually learned about a duplication charm and I used that on the book I want you to read. It only lasts for a couple of days, so you need to read it as fast as you can. Under absolutely NO

circumstances are you to tell anyone else about this book! I'll explain that later also, but I can't right now. It's against the rules. Also, please don't copy the whole thing if you want a permanent bit of any of this. I don't want there to be any chance that someone goes through our things again like they did last year with my own stuff. There hasn't been a copy of this for a few hundred years at least. I would like you to read up and practice the bit about Occlumency. I've learned that both Snape and Dumbledore use Legilimency on us regularly (it's a form of mind reading where they can sift through our memories and hear our thoughts.) Snape almost daily at least. Sometimes, I wasn't able to tell for sure when he did it but was sure it was almost every day. And yes, it's the same one you read on the train ride home. (Snicker) I was a little worried I'd have to carry you to your parents! (Cheeky grin.)

That's about all I can actually talk about for now. I'm a little tired. I've been doing all kinds of things today and I'm physically exhausted. My body just isn't use to this kind of activity. I'm looking forward to your next letter and our trip coming up.

Love,

Harry

xXxXxXx

Hi Harry

I decided to read through the book before replying since you said it would disappear after a few days and didn't specify how long it would last. I wanted to make sure I wrote down whatever I wanted to keep, which was surprisingly quite a bit. My hand is still aching a little! Thank you for it, by the way. It's very interesting.

I'm worried about all these secrets though, Harry. Are you sure you're okay? I mean, you're keeping secrets from Dumbledore, you're doing ... whatever it is that you're doing to exhaust yourself physically, and that also has me worried. You aren't doing anything ... well, something that you shouldn't be, right? I mean, I know you said you had a place to stay and all, but it sound a little ... I don't know. Just be careful, alright?

I've been talking to my parents and they're thinking about letting me get a familiar! I'm trying to decide if I want an owl or a cat. An owl would be more practical, but you let me use Hedwig whenever I need to send out a letter and anything I write to either you or Ron can be sent with whatever owl you send to me while I've always wanted a cat. I'm not sure. Perhaps I'll look into it when I get to the store. All I know for sure is that I'm certainly NOT getting a rat or toad.

I'm glad you said you respect me and trust me to not to spend all of your money. You're right, you don't have to buy my friendship. I'm your friend and, while this is a very large gesture, I will remain your friend, regardless of something like this. And you're right. I'll share anything I get with you. It IS your money, after all and it isn't like I'll be getting a pair of knickers or jewelry that you'll need piercings for. (Snickers) Though you may look good in a dress. Have you ever thought about it?

If you don't mind my asking, where ARE you staying? Are you safe? If you need any kind of help, please don't hesitate or worry about asking for help or anything. I'd be happy to help you with whatever you need.

Your friend

Hermione

xXxXxXx

Hidy Hermione!

My dear Hermione, I DO believe you sounded like you thought I was doing something rather ... NAUGHTY to make my way! (Tsks) For shame, Hermione. However, if you feel I must do such things, then feel free to ask your parents, and I shall remain at your home, if you so choose... (shifty eyes with cheeky grin.) Haha! I'm joking, Hermione. Well ... (Ponders) ... unless you'd like to make me pay in such a manner... (Growls and paws air.)

In truth, Hermione, I'm staying at one of the Potter residences. I won't say more in case Hedwig gets intercepted. It's under several other protections. It's actually very interesting to learn about. In the library wing (yes, I DID say "WING". I'll allow you to peruse to your



heart's content when you come this way,) is a wizarding portrait of my great, great... uh.. several greats grandfather, Jeffrey. He told me where the Lord's Study was. It's apparently where the head of the House of Potter does whatever the Head of the House does. It's like a massive personal office. Inside is another portrait of his that is right above this large control panel that deals with the wards and safety things in, on and around the house. He also taught me how to link floo's to the Potter Floo Network. It would be a personal floo connection, meaning that the connection goes ONLY from where I connect it to Potter Manor. If you'd like, we can meet up a little earlier than I originally wanted to and I could connect your home to my floo connection and you can come here whenever you want and even practice magic if you'd like. I wouldn't be able to get there until mid-July, though. I've got a lot I need to do before then.

I know that you would be willing to help me if I needed it, and I appreciate that from the bottom of my heart. I really do. We've always been there for each other and I know we always will be. If I need help, I promise, I'll let you know.

Also, just to help ease your fears a little, I've hired Dobby. Yes, I AM paying him a fair wage and giving him a fair amount of time off. I was rather surprised when he mentioned he found an area in the house devoted to house elves with furniture sized for them and clothes that would fit and had the Potter crest on them. He doesn't seem overly thrilled with them, though. I think he doesn't like the idea of wearing clothes that once belonged to other house elves, but dislikes the idea of not wearing the Potter crest even more. I'm thinking about getting him a pre-paid certificate to Madam Malkin's to get whatever he wants. What do you think? We also can't figure out where the House Elves that would have been here have gone.

Dobby is able to purchase food from wizarding stores (apparently, that's a normal thing) and we're both capable of taking care of ourselves as well. So please don't worry about us. I promise to be careful. He actually picked something up from the Apothecary for me. It seems that a house elf is not allowed to wear the crest of any family but the one they serve under penalty of death (because of what they are allowed to do for their family) so he can do all sorts of shopping for me. He picked up my second set of potions (which taste nothing like what Pomfrey gives us – I'm beginning to think she makes them taste bad as silent incentive to keep us away,) and had no problems with it.

I will never have a problem sharing something with you, so you may ask Hedwig to take a letter for you whenever you wish, and she'll always be available to respond to anything I give you. As such, I actually think you should get a cat. You're a very affectionate person and have a lot of love to give. I think a cat would be more enjoyable for you to have. You'd be able to show it more affection, and it you, than an owl (forgive me Hedwig!) and cats, in general, tend to enjoy their toys better than owls. I got Hedwig a mouse toy and she seemed to just be very upset that it wasn't edible... However, if you wish to get an owl, maybe we can get Hedwig to help you choose a good one (either that, or she'll choose a mate ... Not sure which it would turn out to be, but at least they wouldn't fight in the owlry.)

I've not considered the wearing of a dress itself, but the benefits and downsides to wearing one. But considering dresses are basically robes in my eyes, I don't see it as too big of a deal. If you get one, though, I'd like to see it. You would certainly look far better in one than I would.

I've got to go now. Hedwig showed up after my exercises and I've got some training to finish up, so I'll write you later.

Love,

Harry

Hermione sighed as she read over the letters she'd received so far from Harry in the past several weeks. She was a little disappointed that each letter was nearly a week apart, but could understand that it took time to get, write and then send off the letters. Each one raised so many questions, and none of them would make her feel comfortable if she tried to ask them. Over all, he put to rest many of her fears that he would need some kind of help from her in a desperate sense, and she was thrilled that he was really writing to her so much. It was far more enjoyable than the summer before when she hadn't received any from him. She knew it wasn't his fault, but it still had hurt at the time.

Not only had he written her often, as he had promised, but he had even sent her something to read that was highly practical and highly intriguing, but very useful. The information that Snape was rummaging around in her head almost each day was a nauseating

concept. It did raise the question, however, on how he figured it out. She knew this book was absolutely nowhere in the library at Hogwarts, but he seemed to have just had it one day. It looked new enough that he may have been able to order it via owl, though.

Also, while she didn't want to actually put voice to it, when he'd mentioned being physically tired, she actually had thought that he may have been doing something a little dubious. But not only had he caught on, he flirted outright back at her! At her! As badly as she wanted to ask her parents to see if he could stay with them at some point of the summer, she was now very worried about what they would think. She was worried about what she would think at this point. Each of his letters held a flirting tone in them somewhere as well. That was one of those things that made her suspect he may have been using his fame for something, to put into Harry's terms, 'naughty' to have a place to stay over the summer. Now, she was beginning to think it was just something else. And she really didn't truly know whether or not she was fond of the idea or not.

xXxXxXx

Harry,

Harry James Potter! I would NOT make you do ... THAT to stay with us over the summer if you needed to!

I AM curious about the home, though, and the charms that are on it. You said your many-greats-grandfather explained it to you? Would he tell me? Would it be against any kinds of rules for him to do so?

While on the subject, I certainly have no problems with you setting our home onto a floo network. In fact, my parents said that they would be happy about it, especially if they could use it also to see a wizarding home and see me practice magic. How did you know I had a fireplace, though? We never talked about that, before. And we're able to use magic there? Even if summer isn't over yet? Does that mean all pureblooded families can do that? That most certainly isn't fair! Muggleborn students are already at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing about magic and that is just one more. We'll be talking about this when we meet again.

I'm happy that you're paying Dobby and not endorsing slavery, Harry. It speaks volumes about the type of man you are. And since we

know he is willing to help you so strongly, then he should be very good at keeping you in line.

I also believe that your idea of a gift for him is a very good one. I'm actually quite surprised with it. I bet he would love it. It would be a way for him to personalize whatever he wants and such. I only ask this because I want to make sure you're thinking about it, but you aren't spending too much, are you? I will give you that card back whenever you ask for it.

Thank you for telling me which familiar you think would be better for me. I don't think I would have phrased any of it that way, but I appreciate what you said. I was actually thinking about a cat more strongly, but I'll most likely get one now. I'm not too fond of the concept of a litter box, but I suppose I'd have to clean up after both regardless. And the neighbors are far less likely to question a cat than a owl anyway.

My Occlumency is coming along splendidly! I think. According to the book, we'll have no way to test the actual defenses until we test them against a skilled Legilimens, but I think I'm doing quite well with it. How do you think you're doing? According to the book, we have to envision what type of defense system we want to have and apply it. Personally, I'm doing mine much like a vault system like Gringotts is supposed to have, just not a cave. The whole tunnels and maze-like thing I hear they have underneath the building sounded interesting during orientation. What about you? Do you think we should learn Legilimency and practice on each other?

Let me know what you decide when you're ready.

Love,

Hermione

Harry set the letter he had received from Hermione down as he finished his dinner. The past several weeks, he had been spending from very early morning for several hours working out in all of the ways he could possibly imagine, pushing himself as hard as he could after finding out that he was still capable of casting the spells he was able to before going back. Then he would rest and practice his occlumency and eat lunch.

While it wasn't normally very healthy to push one's body this hard, his magic healed him up rather quickly, along with some tending from Dobby in the form of potions from the Apothecary after he realized what his master was up to. The growth spurt and nutrient potions he was taking each day had him growing in a very admirable manner. Just in the first three weeks, he had very noticeable muscles along his chest and stomach. Admittedly, it was because push-ups and sit-ups were among the few things he knew of that built any muscle definition. He also spent his time running, stretching, climbing a conjured rope and any other calisthenics he could remember from primary school. He'd even managed to grow five inches, which he was incredibly happy about, though it was mostly right at the beginning and seemed to have slowed down. The real downside, however, was the pain that came from his body changing so quickly. His lower back was almost constantly aching.

After he ate lunch, he would work on different things from the books that Lora had given him. Most often, he worked on battle spells and wandless magics with several attempts at breaking the power limiting seal he had on him. He had found the seal's representation in his mind and had been chipping away at it, but it was rather slow going.

His wandless ability, however, was coming along very slowly, but steadily. It required a massive amount of concentration to do anything until he had figured it out, and then it was easy for him after learning how his magic performed the action. And far more precise than with his wand. He could also 'push' harder and make whatever he was doing more powerful, but lost some of the control. He had found rather quickly that the more power he applied, the less he had to focus to make something happen, though that also amounted to wearing himself out faster. The only real problem was he was only able to levitate light items and cast a weak stunner, but he worked like a trooper at it. He would learn other spells as he went.

Another skill he was practicing was something called 'shifting'. It was basically apparition, but instead of being squeezed in a tube, it was ... well, basically shifting to the side without stepping to do it. The first time he had performed the action, he felt it was very similar to when laying in bed and having that sudden dropping sensation that made him bounce. The shock of the feeling kept him from making it to his destination and he wound up half way to the other side of the room. The differences were very slight, actually, between

that and apparition. Aside from being a completely lost ability, it was also safer and much easier to use. It could even take you to a person rather than a location. Now, he just had to talk to his many-greats grandfather to figure out how to put Hermione on the personal floo system so that she and her parents could visit whenever they chose.

Greetings Dear Hermione (Bows)

There's no need to be hasty, now. I really don't mind if you want to force me into anything like that. Just be sure to let me know... (Shifty eyes)

Yes, my many-greats grandfather will tell you all about the wards. Yes, there actually are rules about telling you about them, but you only need my permission (waggles eyebrows.) And you've already got that.

Yes, we can use magic here. I know it isn't fair, but there are actually a few reasons as to why we can. You see, the Ministry, from what I've learned, detects magic in two ways. One, is by location. A wand makes a 'signature' (think like a particular tone from a bell for a wand, whereas the same thing would be a violin by using wandless magic) that the Ministry searches for. They blanket everywhere they are looking over. Once a 'signature' is found, they check for who lives in that area and then check for tracking spells on wands that have been tripped for anyone from that area at the time it was cast. Yes, this means they don't bother with pureblooded areas with the belief that 'it's too much of a strain on the system' or some such nonsense. Anyway, that means that, if I were to go your home and cast a spell, they would assume it was you if you were the only person living near there. Well, that is unless there are other magical people living in the area you live in. By only having one person, there is no reason for the automated system to cross reference the wand itself. I'm not sure how they can tell if it is an adult wizard instead of underage one, though, because I know magic had been cast at my home by wizards and I didn't get in trouble with it. But here, you will be able to use it all you want. Or you could just use wandless magic. I've got a book on that, for you, which you can practice here.

I've got to figure out what to do to connect you to the Potter Floo Network, though. While I'll be able to cast the spell where you live

(Jeffrey said it would be okay since I was emancipated and your wand's tracking spell wouldn't activate, which makes me wonder why it would not get you in trouble somehow) and actually do what's needed (including making your fireplace bigger,) I have to get done to his satisfaction or he won't allow me to try the connection. Apparently, there's a risk of messing it up and we wouldn't know until we either tried it or I came back and asked him if the connection went through. I think he just likes to watch me wave a stick around (pouts.) I should be able to do it in not too much longer, so I'll let you know.

Thank you for being accepting my idea with Dobby. I'll see what I can do, then, to make it worth while for him. He's a little ... Well, I guess I can go with "devoted", but he's a good guy.

No worries about the familiar thing. I said what I felt and it's all true. I'd be happy to help you with anything you need and any time.

As for my Occlumency, I think I'm doing really well, too. I'm not going to say what I've got going on here, just in case, but I'll let you know when we see each other. I'll be showing up this Saturday, unless you send a letter saying otherwise. You've got plenty of time to.

I think you're right about learning Legilimency, though. We have to learn how to do that and we have to learn how to defend ourselves from attacks, so we probably should meet up earlier, rather than later. I'll work on it and try to have it done soon. Just to be very sure you know, this would mean that we would know each other's thoughts and memories. If you're sure that you're okay with that, then I am as well.

Ron should be back to the Burrow in another week and a half, so we should expect some kind of letter from him to talk about their holiday. Well, I think so, anyway. Ron isn't much for letters, but still.

Love Always,

Harry

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] - Alrighty. Next chapter will be Harry and Hermione meeting up. Their shopping trip (has a few focuses, which is why I'll be writing it out, but it won't be horrendously long, I don't think,) finishing off the summer quickly and then arrival at Hogwarts. Expect the shenanigans to begin as well.



## Chapter3 – Sow The Seeds

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] -

Challenges: On my profile is a link to my FF (DOT) Net Forums. On those forums are challenge requests in the Harry Potter and Naruto universes. I'd greatly appreciate any views on those challenges or anyone who would like to accept them, feel free to let me know. I'd personally like to know if anyone finds them as decent plot devices or not. If you do accept a challenge, feel free to reply to the forum and let others know, preferably after you've posted the first chapter so they have something to visit and you can link to it.

Also, I say "Dark Forest" later in this chapter rather than "Forbidden Forest" for a reason. It will be explained in a later chapter.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Agent Double O Hex" by KafkaExMachina (H/Hr and probably the only crossover I've not immediately hated with a fiery passion.)

xXx PREVIOUSLY xXx

Harry became emancipated, wrote a lot to Hermione, exercised, practiced wandless magic, hired Dobby, set up his mental defenses, found the power-limiter seal's representation in his mind and made a small amount of leeway into breaking through it, but not much and learned that he can set up Hermione onto his floo system.

xXx STORY xXx

Harry awoke early on the morning he was to go to Hermione's and thought things over while he went through his morning workout. The past six weeks he had been working out like a madman to increase his speed, strength, endurance and magical abilities. While it was

normal for things like these to increase over summer when a body will do the most physical advancement, the use of potions for his malnourishment and to jumpstart his body into a growth spurt all added together to make one heck of a difference. He certainly didn't have the physical stature of a bodybuilder or his memories of Viktor Krum during his fourth year, but he had gained eight and a half inches to his original height and all of his muscles developed to be easily visible, though he would still be considered wiry and lean. Admittedly, a part of it was also due to working out so much each day. His muscle definition would lessen slightly once his workout time lowered when the new school year started, but it was a minor issue and he already had plans to 'discover' the Room of Requirement again.

His wandless ability increased as well. He had finally learned how to offset some of his need for concentration for simply pushing out raw power into what he wanted. As long as he had the power to shove into whatever he wanted to do, he almost didn't have to concentrate on it. The only problems he had come across, though, were that he could only fight straight out for about a half hour before he reached his limit and could barely use even his wand and that he had less finesse, or finer control when he overpowered the spells. The more he would practice individual spells, the less power they took, but he had only learned a select few of the more common ones he would use wandlessly. In particular, the levitation, stupefy, enervate, banishing, incarcerous and changing colors of something. He could do several others, but only if she pumped plenty of power into them.

He'd have worked more on individual ones, but felt it was more important to learn the ability to empower his spells like he did during training than each spell alone. He could work on the spells later. They just weren't as strong as he could have been with them or as precise until he worked on them long enough. The Patronus was the only other spell he worked on to the best of his ability to the point where it matched his first misty Patronus in his original third year. He hoped to have the Patronus fully corporeal by the time he got on the train, remembering the attack. The only problem was that all of the memories he had, and no matter how much power he pushed into it, it wasn't more than a misty light from his hand.

Each night that he went to bed since his arrival at Potter Manor, he spent thinking over everything Lora had told him; about Hermione to be more specific. He had come to the conclusion on his first night

back that he was an idiot for not having considered her for a romantic interest, but wasn't sure what he actually felt for her. Going two months into his new life and trying to decide of his own feelings had made him come to a rather interesting conclusion. He didn't really know if he loved her or not. At least not romantically.

He could safely say he wanted to always have her near him. He would absolutely destroy anyone who would hurt her and would even be willing, very willing, to go about the usual boyfriend girlfriend ... activities. Actually, in truth, he couldn't think of even a single reason to not go out with her, or more, if things happened the way Lora seemed to say they would. It had been a week ago that he finally decided that he would try to go out with her and let things progress as they did. If Lora was telling the truth, which he had no reason to not believe at this point, then he and Hermione would end up happy together unless he did something stupid or by being too sure of himself. Harry had briefly considered Ron's feelings that he knew would come about later, but decided that Hermione could make the decision. It really was hers to make, after all.

Finally finished with his exercises and having eaten a light breakfast, Harry spent a short time working on his mental defenses, which he decided he'd go ahead and call it occlumency since it didn't seem to have much of an actual name, and it would keep people from asking too many questions. That was certainly the last thing he needed.

He sat cross-legged in the library of Potter Manor and relaxed as he breathed deeply. Almost immediately, Harry found himself standing atop the astronomy tower of the representation of Hogwarts in his mind. Looking around, he saw several dragons flying through the sky, performing aerial acrobatics that probably wouldn't have been possible in the real world. He had several scores of goblins and centaurs running about the Dark Forest outside of the castle walls, the only safe passage through the path from the main gate that led outside of his mind which were guarded by a pair of acromantula that put Aragog's size to shame with goblins sitting on top of their heads, holding reins to chase any illusive prey down.

Along the top of the castle walls, which were widened and given walkways, there were yet more goblins and more than several stone gargoyles that would come to life at the goblins' command. Harry quickly checked to make sure the goblins arming the canons and the

archers were all still well-equipped before smiling lightly to himself and going downstairs and into the halls of the main building itself.

As soon as he left the stairway, he passed the two suits of armor that would animate for anyone not authorized to pass them and a wandering group of four Luna's and one Hermione who gave him a distracted smile and greeted him before continuing on their way, barely acknowledging his own greeting, though Hermione smiled and waved. He passed several other groups on his way to the Headmaster's office of either Luna, Sirius, Remus, Neville or the twins, who primarily used prank items in the usual devious ways and each being led by a Hermione who coordinated them to their actions as needed. He had made them as old as they were when he went back so he could have them that much stronger and skilled. He knew it didn't actually happen that way, but it helped to think of it as such.

Once he reached the stone gargoyle, Harry gave the password, 'Lora', which he'd chosen under the belief that no one would know of the name and he had met almost no one, especially in the wizarding world, who was named that, so felt rather safe. Though a pair of disillusioned goblins five feet down the hall who had the authorization lists didn't hurt either.

"Ah, hello Harry!" A mental version of Hermione greeted him as he entered before turning back to a control panel that showed the status of all of his defenses, the power-limiting seal, his health, his magical core, status of the containment matrices used to keep a Legilimens from roaming freely in his mind and binding him or her to the rules of the world Harry had created and had a communications panel for coordinating everything together.

"Hey Hermione. How are the defenses today?" Harry asked. She continued to eye the control panel as she responded, though she kept most attention towards the open book in her lap.

"Strong as ever, Harry. The secret passages are still fully blocked and have a dragon and goblin handler for anyone who thinks they can be sneaky, the perimeter is holding steady and nothing has weakened. Actually, by giving each sentient being a modicum of actual intelligence and self-awareness has allowed them to interact with one another as needed and, since you don't hold any prejudices and didn't give them any, they all work together

surprisingly well." Harry's eyes widened. That was ... unexpected, but not bad.

"That's cool. So they each make their own decisions?" Hermione nodded after flashing him a smile.

"Yup! It makes my job easier and they all know the authorization lists and what their own jobs are, so they don't try to fight each other to do what they think they should. Your attempting to make them all as realistic as possible was a great idea," she said before realizing that a few of the goblin patrols on the wall were converging towards the eastern side and leaving the western one weaker than would be advisable. Quickly setting things right, she looked over to Harry who was double-checking the status of everything himself.

"Hey! I can do it, thank you!" She shoved him towards the door gently as he protested. "If there's a problem, I'll let you know, now scram!" As the door closed, Harry blinked at it in surprise and confusion. She had never done that before, and was usually willing to talk for some time before actually shoving him out the door.

"Erm ... yea ... I'll just ... scram?" Still totally confused at being kicked out of his own mind, Harry left the Headmaster's office and left to set up an entrance area for Hermione in the Gryffindor common room in case she wanted to practice legilimency. It wouldn't do to have her first arrival surrounded by goblins, acromantula and dragons. Then he would have to work with Jeffrey until the old man decided he was proficient enough with the floo creation spell.

On the other side of the door, the faux Hermione sighed and went back to her book. "One of these days, he's going to realize I'm a direct link to his own subconscious trying to tell him what he wants. But until then," she opened the book to the end where she was cataloging various dreams and mental images of people from his past, "giving him dreams to get that extra little push should be all the better!" She chuckled darkly for a moment before sighing heavily.

"I just wish he'd given me my own male form instead of Hermione's, regardless of how much more secure it makes us feel!"

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"Hermione! Hurry up! Breakfast has already been reheated twice!" Emma Granger was quite amused with her daughter's actions throughout the last few weeks. Each time that beautiful snow-white owl would show up, Hermione would be in a good mood for two days before coming back down to earth. For now, Emma wasn't sure if it was a possibly romantic interest or if she was simply that pleased to have a friend who wrote to her so often and diligently. Considering the stories of valor and heroic deeds this 'Harry' that she has been conversing with has done, she assumed it was probably a little bit of both.

"Just a minute! I'm almost done!" Emma smiled and sat down at the table sipped her coffee as her husband eyed her suspiciously, father senses kicking into overdrive from the unnatural activity in the Granger household.

"So..." Dan waited a moment to see if his wife would offer anything up on her own, but he was disappointed to see her smirk at him, a playful gleam in her eye.

"So what?" She asked sweetly. Dan's scowl made her feel fuzzy inside. It was great to tease him like she did when they were going out.

"So," he began, "why is Hermione spending an inordinate amount of time getting ready today? Does it have anything to do with why you took the day off?" Emma sat her coffee cup down and fluttered her eyelashes at him, setting off warning bells and a screaming voice in his head that tried to warn him of danger.

"I didn't tell you?" She began innocently enough. "I'm sorry. Today is the day that Hermione's friend Harry comes over." Dan's eyes narrowed and he began to look around as if expecting to find the boy hiding in a corner somewhere in the kitchen, and not totally convinced that he couldn't be with that magic stuff.

"Oh is he, now?" Dan asked dangerously. Emma chuckled as she watched the protective father in her husband come out.

"Don't worry, Dan. There's been nothing to suggest that there's anything romantic about any of this."

"Maybe he needs some work done," he thought speculatively, thinking about the dental practice he and his wife ran together. "I'm sure I could get some answers out of him. I did just get that new scraper..." Emma smiled brightly at him.

"Possibly, but Hermione would kill you." Dan sighed and slumped in his chair as he thought it through.

"Yes, most likely," he said with an amusing pout. Emma reached over and gave him a conciliatory hug.

"He's spoken with Hermione to do something or other to let us have a way of going to his house whenever we want to, and we can talk with him whenever we feel like it. So you'll be able to meet and threaten him soon enough, I'm sure." Dan nodded and took a bite of his eggs, taking comfort in his wife's promises.

"So what are you three doing today?"

"I'm not totally sure, actually. I know we're doing some clothes shopping since that was what he specifically asked about at the beginning of the summer and he and Hermione were looking to buy a few books and things. I'm really not totally sure what else they're looking for." Dan nodded as he thought it over and Hermione came into the kitchen with a smile and plopped down to begin eating her breakfast. Dan took a quick glance to see that she appeared to have simply dressed normally and come downstairs, but knew from experience that no girl EVER took that long to get read and simply appear to look like she normally did. At least, not without a male waiting for her. He still suspected they made men wait on purpose. But then, he noticed her hair was slightly tamer and seemed somewhat straighter than normal.

'DANGER! DANGER! MALE THREAT TO DAUGHTER DETECTED! KILL! MAIM! ROOT CANAL?' He forced the warning tones in his head back and smiled at his daughter, though Emma could tell he looked a little sick at the same time.

"I hear you've got a full day today, Pumpkin." Hermione beamed at her father and nodded enthusiastically as she swallowed her bite of toast.

"Oh, yes! We're meeting up with Harry today and we're going to get some books for the summer!" Hermione said enthusiastically, a bright smile lighting up her face. Emma hid her smile behind her coffee cup as she saw Dan slump and sigh in relief when Hermione's focus seemed to be on the books she would be getting.

"And I haven't seen Harry in two months and after seeing him daily for nine months, it seems weird to not be around him every day." Emma snorted into her coffee cup as Dan's face paled drastically and his narrowed eyes began to search the kitchen again while she covered her amusement by acting as if the coffee went down the wrong pipe when Hermione looked at her.

"Sorry honey. Just tried to breathe in as I was swallowing," Emma said, forcing a cough to help her case. The following twenty minutes before Dan had to leave for work, Emma watched amusedly as he seemed to peer around corners and such as if searching for the boy who may very well be able to magic himself into their home. Or at least, it certainly wasn't as unlikely as waving a stick and making a book levitate like the McGonagall woman demonstrated before Hermione's first year.

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"Okay Dobby," Harry began. "You remember everything?" The happy house elf nodded enthusiastically with his ears flopping back and forth.

"Yes, Master Harry! Dobby be knowing what to do! If you be calling Dobby, then Dobby is to make himself invisible and pop to you silently in case there is being people around who is not knowing of the magical world!" Harry smiled at his little friend and nodded.

"That's right! Very excellent, Dobby! That should be everything, thank you." Dobby nodded and disappeared with a quiet pop to do whatever it was that he had found to do around the place. Harry, meanwhile, transfigured his robe into muggle clothing that he assumed looked pretty decent and gathered his new wallet with his new card, a large sack of floo powder and placed his wand on his arm in the invisible holster he got from his first foray into Diagon Alley. Once he had everything, he closed his eyes and pictured Hermione in his mind's eye and felt himself shift for a brief second before stopping.



Opening his eyes, he saw himself behind Hermione who was in a chair and reading what appeared to be what she had copied from the mind magics book he had sent to her. Finding himself with a golden opportunity, he leaned forward and quickly wrapped her into a hug, getting a surprised squawk out of Hermione as he did so. The part that surprised him however, was when she threw her head back in her surprise and hit his forehead.

"ACK!" He backed several steps up and shook his head as Hermione twirled around in shock before apparently hopping over the side of the chair and hit him in a hug like a missile hard enough to keep the room spinning and into the wall.

"Harry!" Said boy smiled at the two dancing images in his vision and laughed lightly.

"Hello Hermione," he nodded at one, then the second, "Hermione. It's nice to see the two of you again."

Hermione offered a sheepish smile as she released him. "Sorry about that. You surprised me is all." Having his vision back, he smiled again and hugged her back.

"My fault. I shouldn't have surprised you like that." He let her go and looked around. "So what's up?"

"Not much, really. My mom is upstairs getting ready and my dad is at the surgery." Harry nodded as Hermione's eyes widened and she stepped closer and stood up straight.

"You've gotten taller!" Harry nodded as she measured her height to his with her hand. "Much taller!"

"Yup! I've been taking some nutrient potions. They're kind of like vitamins, but stronger. I've also been working out and hit a growth spurt. Summer is when we grow the most and I was eating well and taking potions to fix my previous growth rate. Add it all together and it makes a bigger change," he said, smiling. Hermione stepped back and looked him up and down, noticing his shoes were the same ones, but looked to have been spelled to look a little better. The same with simple, black pants and a very pale blue shirt.

"Well, you've certainly gotten bigger," she said with a smile, feeling a firmer body in her arms than she remembered. Harry smiled at her and poked her shoulder.

"You have too. You've gotten a little taller and your hair looks nicer, too." Hermione blushed slightly. Yes, she had gotten taller, but her hair was mainly because she spent a long time trying to make it look normal.

"Yes, well, it's summer. What do you expect?" She asked rhetorically. Harry's smile vanished to turn his expression into a grave one.

"Tan lines and bikini's." A smack and laugh later, the still blushing Hermione led him into the kitchen.

"How did you show up here, anyway? And do you want anything to drink," she asked, getting a glass of lemonade for herself.

"Thank you, but no. And I got here by shifting. It's kind of like apparition, but without the squeezing feeling or popping and there aren't any wards to keep people from doing it and is much safer. You still have to visualize where you want to go in extreme detail, though, so I just pictured you since I know you so well, which is why I appeared behind you," he said while appearing to think. "I guess it's a good thing you weren't in the shower." Hermione had almost choked on her lemonade, but swallowed before anything happened.

"Can you teach me how to do it? And if you ever pop up in the shower with me, I'm yanking off your danglies," she threatened, causing him to flinch.

"Yes, but only if you promise not to rip those off. I've grown rather fond of them, thank you," he said primly. "But now that I've been here, I can just pop into whatever room. I'll just need one that is usually kept closed in case you've got company over or something. I can't really use the floo when we set it up for that same reason." Hermione nodded, seeing that make perfect sense.

"Well, thankfully, the fireplace is in the den. The only one who uses the room is me when I read by the fireplace and we keep the curtains closed over the windows most often, so no one will see when we use it."

"Excellent! It sounds perfect!"

"So," Hermione began, sitting uncomfortably close after returning to the living room, "tell me about this library wing and how you have a book filled with information not seen for a very long time." Harry's palms began to sweat and his hands began to shake as he saw a predatory gleam in Hermione's eye.

"Well, it's got a lot of books in it, larger than the Hogwarts library, actually. Apparently, my family had a Potter who was a pack rat," he said, looking a little sheepish. "He went about gathering everything he could find and archived it, even simple and mundane things and then taught his kids to do it as a tradition and hobby." Hermione's grin was a terrifying thing. She oftentimes wore that expression after winning a book from a sneaky Ravenclaw during test times.

"Well, that's excellent news! But we should wait to get too many books until we've had a chance to look through what you've got."

"That makes sense," he said with a shocked face. He hadn't even thought of it, but he had no clue what all he had. The only book Harry had been reading was the one Lora had given him, since he already had his school material known. He was about to tell Hermione about what he expected he would need to get that the library wouldn't have since it hadn't been updated in at least thirteen years when a woman that looked almost identical to Hermione stepped into the room.

"Oh, hello! You must be Harry." Emma watched as the boy got up from his very close spot next to Hermione and walked towards her, introducing himself. He seemed somewhat taller than she remembered him appearing when he hugged Hermione at the train station and seemed more stocky than she thought she remembered as well, but had gentle green eyes that were simply gorgeous!

'Eyes like that should be illegal for boys,' she thought. With those eyes and a smile like that, it was no wonder her daughter was always in such a good mood when those letters showed up.

"Yes Ma'am. I'm Harry Potter. It's a pleasure to meet you." His hand in hers was gentle, but moderately calloused for a kid his age, surprising her. He must have been used to working.

"The pleasure is mine. I'm sorry, I didn't even hear the doorbell ring." Harry laughed nervously and scratched the back of his head.

"My fault, actually. It was easier to come here by a magical form of transportation called 'shifting', and I used that instead of coming a normal way. I used Hermione as my anchor and I showed up in your living room," he said, still looking nervous. Emma only raised an eyebrow.

"I suppose Dan had the right idea of it this morning. He actually can just magic his way into our home.' The idea of any magical person being able to do such a thing was a bit scary, but there had to be some kind of laws against it. They wouldn't want them doing it to themselves, after all.

"No worries, Harry. So, what were you hoping to get done today?" Emma sat in a chair across from where Harry and Hermione were sitting to listen.

"Well, we were going to get several books, but Hermione made a good point about not having any kind of good idea of what is in my library at the moment and I shouldn't go about buying things before knowing if I need them or not. Other than that, I'm needing new clothes since these ones are only transfigured. And with my recent growth spurt, I need some that actually fit." He wasn't joking, either. Along with growing taller, his shoulders had filled out thanks to so many push-ups and his feet and legs grew as well, making his pants too short and shoes too small.

"Other than that, I figured I'd set up your floo and treat you guys to wherever you want to go for lunch for helping me out and whatever you two want to do, I'm game for." Both girls nodded.

"Do you already know what kind of clothes you're wanting to get?"

Harry blinked at Emma with a blank expression for a few seconds. "Boy clothes?" Hermione snorted and Emma smiled indulgently, if a bit weakly, at Harry as she realized exactly why she was needed. The boy had no clue what he was doing.

"Alright. We'll just see what you want when we get there," Emma said, causing Harry to shrug.

"Works for me. Do you want me to go ahead and put your fireplace on the floo network?"

"I was actually wondering about that. Our fireplace is rather small. Certainly not big enough to stand in. How will we be able to use it? The book Hermione has said any fireplace could work, but not how," Emma asked.

"Well, I'll use magic to make it bigger and," he untied the large sack of floo powder from his belt, "then this can be used whenever you want to use it." After getting agreement, Hermione led Harry and Emma to the den and motioned towards the fireplace, ready to see how it was done.

Harry eyed the fireplace speculatively before flicking his wand and making it grow tall enough to comfortably fit Emma with a few inches to spare and wide enough for four people in case Hagrid ever needed to show up. The fireplace itself had been a simple block design that was more efficiency than functionality by simply being cut into the wall with the white walls smooth on either side except where the metal curtain to keep embers from setting fire to the house was attached. He decided to change it from the white walls to a tasteful stone of white marble with black, bronze and crystal veins with protruding shelves on either side that arced out from the sides as if waiting for a wider clientèle and a marble bowl and lid on one side to hold the floo powder. Over all, it was an artful, tasteful and elegant design. It didn't exactly work for the room's style, but neither girl wanted to tell him that.

"Does that work, or would you like something different," he asked looking over to see Emma wide-eyed and Hermione looking like she was trying to figure out a difficult problem.

"That should be fine," Emma said, still a little shocked at the display of magic she'd witnessed. That was very different than making a book levitate. Harry simply nodded and began moving his wand in a complex pattern of graceful arcs and smaller, harsh movements as if writing with his wand in the air, muttering under his breath. After making a jabbing motion towards the fireplace, a fire erupted in a bright blue that quickly turned into an emerald green and died back out as Harry stopped speaking.

"Excellent! Now all that's left is to test it out," he said brightly, dumping the majority of the floo powder into the new bowl for it and leaving enough for two trips. He tossed the powder into the fireplace, causing it to turn green, spoke and stepped through, going through the floo system like normal, though without any other connections until he popped out of the hearth at his home.

"Well, that works." He quickly tossed the remainder of the powder back into the fireplace. "Granger Sanctuary!" He appeared in the Granger's den flat on his face.

"I have got to get the hang of that," he grumbled as Hermione helped him up.

"So it works, then?" Harry nodded, his nose twitching from the ash still on his nose hairs.

"Mhm. You can only go to my place from this one right now, but you can go anywhere from there. Just say 'Potter Manor' to go to my house and then 'Granger Sanctuary' to come back here." Hermione scrunched her face as she heard their address.

"Why 'Granger Sanctuary'? That sounds a bit odd, doesn't it?"

Harry chuckled. He rather liked seeing her nose all scrunched up. It was cute. "If you ever decide to go on the public floo network, you can choose whatever you want, but I wanted to make sure that no one would guess your floo address too easily if they ever managed to get to my own floo." Not really caring, Hermione just shrugged and decided to ignore it.

"Oh well. Can I try it?"

Harry nodded and Hermione rushed the hearth with a creepy grin plastered over her face and disappeared in green flames.

"That is safe, right?" Emma asked, a little disturbed that both children willingly leapt into green fire. Harry nodded and smiled.

"Very much so, as long as the fire is green. That's the properties of the magical components of the ash in the fire that make it perfectly safe," he explained. "I don't know if magical children have to be warned off about that in their younger years or not, but we're old

enough to know green means safe." Emma frowned slightly, but nodded, willing to accept the answer. He just went through it twice and was no worse for wear. After waiting for about two minutes, Hermione came back through, a little soot on her nose and cheek and giggling.

"Harry, your house is huge!"

"Yea, it's been in the family for a long time from what I can tell. According to some of the portraits, all of the Potters lived together rather than spread out. Something about communal something or other." Emma noticed the shift to the 'what do we do now' expressions on their faces and decided to take control.

"Alright you two. To the car." Harry followed Hermione out of her house and into the back seat of the Grangers' car where she forced him into explaining about his summer during the hour long trip to their first stop.

"Alright, Harry. Spill. Tell me everything you've been doing this summer." Harry laughed as he held up his hands in a placating gesture.

"Don't worry, Hermione. I've been perfectly safe and comfortable at Potter Manor," he began, placing his hands back down and one of them close to her leg on the seat to gauge her reaction to close proximity, curious about where she may stand this early. She didn't seem to notice, however.

"I saw that when I went to your home," she said with an eye roll. "But I mean what else have you been doing? Your letters talked about all sorts of things. You mentioned Dobby picking up potions for you and that you don't know what happened to your house elves. What was that all about?" Chuckling, Harry started from the beginning and explained a slightly amended version of events for now.

"Well, I sent a letter to Gringotts about my parents' will and asked about my holdings and such. We met and they told me about everything I have and we looked through their will and it said that I wasn't supposed to live with the Dursleys under any circumstances and a few other things. Since the head of a 'Most Noble and Ancient House' can get legally emancipated at eleven so they have someone in charge of the family, we were able to ignore having to

get Dumbledore's approval, since he is my magical guardian and executioner of the will, and I got the Dursleys into signing their approval of the emancipation."

"Isn't eleven a little young," Emma asked from the front seat. "And if this Dumbledore is your magical guardian, how were you able to ignore him?"

"Most children from what the wizarding society calls 'Most Noble and Ancient' houses are purebloods, and they're trained from all but birth into taking over the family and, since eleven is when we start at Hogwarts and is considered a leap into magical adulthood, it's been allowed for centuries." Harry was very happy his rings supported him with legal knowledge. The information came out almost before he even realized he was talking.

"Anyway, once I was emancipated, that gave me full rights of an adult wizard, meaning full account access, exception to the underage magic use policies and the ability to make my own choices about things that deal with me," he said, smiling brightly. Meanwhile, Emma frowned from the front seat where she was driving.

"Being emancipated means that you're held to adult responsibilities as well, Harry. You are aware of this, yes?" She asked. Harry nodded.

"Yes Ma'am. I'm fully aware of that. I've actually taken care of everything that was waiting to be handled after I took over my responsibilities about a week after being emancipated and the goblins brought it to my attention. I'm making very sure to keep on top of things," he assured her, "even got the goblins inventorying my vaults so I know everything I have on hand."

"There wasn't anything bad, was there," Hermione asked, looking a little worried.

"Nah. Mainly, it was just alerting me to stocks I've got and what my role would be, a tonne of arranged marriage proposals that I had them throw out, an explanation of how my account had been handled by them that was set up by my father and such. Nothing really serious," he explained with a shrug as Hermione's eyes widened considerably.



"Arranged marriage proposals! You have to get married?" Hermione asked incredulously. Harry shook his head.

"No, no. Nothing like that. It was mostly from years ago where people sent contracts to try and arrange a marriage with me but couldn't since there was no one to agree to them. Dumbledore didn't have authorization to put me into a marriage and no one could approve a marriage for me."

"Oh," she said, looking very relieved. "That's good! I thought you were going to be thrown into something you wouldn't want!" Harry laughed and began to explain what he'd been learning throughout the summer, ignorant of Emma's paying very close attention to the conversation.

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Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster to Hogwarts, was sitting in his office when a silver bauble on the shelf across the room that was steadily puffing white smoke chimed and the smoke began to blow out steadily instead of puffing gently and became a blackened gray. The old man's blue eyes widened as he accidentally released the first bout of accidental magic in decades as his long, waist-length beard frizzed out and rolled itself up to his chin.

"Ack!" He hopped up and poked the device with his wand, checking the readings and promptly lost control of his bowels. Something that hadn't been done in nearly a month. "Oh no! The wards! Harry! My pants!" With a quick movement of his wand, his underwear was clean once again and he rushed over to the floo, throwing in the magical powder.

"Arabella Figg!" He promptly stepped through to the sight of a surprised older woman surrounded by what had to have been nearly twenty cats. 'It seems she got more,' he thought absently as he immediately ran out her door without a second glance or word of explanation, disillusioning himself before he was actually out the door.

He quickly rushed over to Number Four, Privet Drive and looked at the outside for a quick moment. There was no external damage to suggest anything untoward had happened, though the flowerbeds and small details around everything showed signs of only the barest

of attention having been paid to them. Finding nothing obvious to explain why the wards were about to fail, he moved around back, finding everything in a similar state. Frowning, he knocked on the door and reappeared to the world as his disillusionment was canceled.

"Who are you," an annoying voice asked as the rather rotund boy answered the door with a sneer. "And why are you in our back yard?"

"My name is Albus Dumbledore. I'm coming to find out where Harry Potter is." The rotund boy's eyes widened when Harry was mentioned. It was a few seconds later that he realized that this old man was one of his kind.

"Mum!" The boy tried to shut the door as he spun around and left the kitchen in a hurry. Dumbledore simply held out his hand to stop the door and stepped inside.

"What on earth do you think you're doing, coming into our home uninvited!" Petunia was coming in from somewhere in the living room when she saw the old man in the kitchen. She, however, almost immediately recognized who the man was, or more accurately, what world he came from. "You!"

Albus immediately put his hands up in a calming gesture. "I have only a few questions and then I will leave. I did knock before entering." Frowning, and looking at the way she came where she could hear Dudley hiding in his room, she quickly nodded her head.

"Fine. Ask and then leave. Vernon should be back soon." Albus nodded and didn't bother trying to sit, seeing the woman already making shooing motions with her hands.

"I am curious about where young Harry is." He watched the woman pale and her jaw slacken.

"He ... That is, the boy, he emancipated himself the day after returning." Only years of practice at occlumency kept Dumbledore from screaming like a little girl. He did quickly perform another scourgify for his underwear, however.

"Tell me everything!" Wincing, Petunia did just that.

'Harry, what have you done?'

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Harry shifted back to his home and collapsed onto the couch in the sitting room with a groan. 'I am never going shopping with women again!' As he sulked, he raised his right foot over his knee and massaged it firmly, knowing he would do it again if either of them wanted to go. While tiring, it was quite fun.

Hermione, it seemed, was a monster. He'd decided after only a few minutes that there was a gene somewhere in the female body that caused them to lose sense of all time and induce some form of pain-killing chemical for all that walking about. That was all he could think of that would keep them from collapsing in exhaustion. He had been running every day since he was emancipated and Hermione was bouncing around him in circles like it was nothing!

He had managed to do what he wanted during their excursion though. That made it all worth while. Harry had originally wanted to get new clothes and use it as a way to invite Hermione to share the day with him where he could flirt lightly with her, but the opportunity to make a much stronger impression had shown itself, and he couldn't help but take it. Harry chuckled as he remembered the smile in her reflection of the mirror in the fitting room before he shook his head and called Dobby before he would risk forgetting his new plans.

"Dobby?"

"Master Harry Potter, sir?" Harry looked to the side where Dobby had silently popped in.

"The Grangers agreed to come for dinner tomorrow night. Would that be okay?" Dobby nodded in energetic bliss. The poor elf was ecstatic to cook for Harry's friends.

"Oh! That would be good, Master Harry! Dobby is being able to make anything you want!" Harry chuckled again.

"Anything you would like to make, Dobby, is okay," he said. The happy elf nodded and went about making the evening meal.

"Hello Harry!" Surprised to hear another voice right beside him, Harry turned to see the grinning face of Lora right next to him, just far enough away for him to see her and to know he wasn't seeing things. Suddenly, he let out a yelp and hopped over the back of the couch.

"What are you doing here!" Frantically, he patted down his front side, looking for any unnoticed wounds or missing bits while Lora laughed loudly.

"I came so we could have a quick chat about everything." She eyed him as he looked about suspiciously before sitting in the chair across from her over the mahogany table. "I thought you would have a few questions now that you've had time to look up a few things from the book and time to think." Harry nodded, having several, actually.

"You're right, actually. One of the things I've been trying to think about the most has been how I died." He squirmed uncomfortably in the leather cushions. "I can remember a couple days towards the end with Hermione right after Ron left us while searching for the horcruxes, but the closer I get to the end, I found I was missing pieces of the day, then more and more until I lost days in between." He looked at her questioningly. "What happened?"

"Well," she said frowning, "you had managed to find Gryffindor's brooch, remember?" He nodded, prompting her to continue. "When you entered the castle where it was hidden, you hadn't been able to get through all of the traps and wards that Riddle had set up and you died, along with Hermione." She watched as he paled and shuddered, knowing the memory was coming back to him.

"We didn't have enough skill to break the wards properly," he whispered. "There was a matrix of fire strung about, but inverted. We hadn't known about anything like it until we saw it activate." Lora nodded sadly.

"Exactly. Unfortunately, while you still have your knowledge from before, it wasn't enough then. That's one of the reasons we wanted to send you backwards in time. So that you could emancipate yourself to get on better grounds with the goblins and possibly learn some warding skills next summer from them, or the many books

about it you'll find here," she said with a Marauder-worthy smirk, knowing what was in his family's past. "We also wanted you to be able to get closer to your soulmate." Harry frowned as he heard that term again.

"That's something else I've been meaning to ask you. You keep calling Hermione my soulmate." He leaned back in his chair and cocked his head to the side. "I don't understand. What does that mean, exactly?" Lora looked up at the ceiling for several moments, trying to decide the best way to explain it.

"Well, you humans have several different meanings to the term. Some believe that a soulmate is the literal 'other half' of a person. The only two who will be perfectly happy with each other. Some, say that a soulmate is just someone who you can be happy and lead a pleasant life with."

"So what is it, really," he asked again.

"Well, the truth is, a soulmate is a person who complements you and you can love and cherish and be happy with forever and yes, feels like they complete you. You will, of course, have your rough moments as all relationships will, but there isn't just any one person for any other person. It isn't just some thing where you find each other and lock into place like the yin-yang symbol, but you still have to work at it. It can't be taken for granted and you don't automatically fall in love with each other when you meet, otherwise, you and Hermione would have been together from the start." Lora waved her hand and a glass with a bright blue liquid appeared on the table which she drank from.

"Soulmates are rather rare. I'll agree with that. In fact, there are only three women in the British Isles that could be that close to you, two of which are actually in Hogwarts."

"Wait," Harry said, really confused now. "If there are two in Hogwarts, why was it Hermione that was my soulmate?" Lora waggled a finger at him, frighteningly like Madam Pince from the library.

"Like I said earlier, you don't simply click into place in a relationship. You have to work at it. The other girl that could have been it didn't spend nearly enough time with you, though that was as much your fault as anything else."

"Who is she," he asked, confused.

Lora simply shook her head. "It doesn't matter anymore. You've already begun bonding with Hermione. Both in your past lives and this one, only you're actively strengthening it this time. You may have simply just begun, but it's started now. He's made sure it'll be helpful to you this time around."

"What bond? And who's 'he'?" Harry asked, feeling like he was missing a lot. Lora flinched, not meaning to have said that.

"Have you ever heard of the phrase 'seeing is believing and believing is seeing'?"

"Yes," he said, causing her to nod.

"Well, the truth is just as I told you before. All things have balance to work properly, just like the fundamentals of alchemy; balance is supreme. If you look at many of the religions in the world, you'll find that, at their core, they are fundamentally the same: Supreme God or Goddess, or the Lord and Lady in Wiccan religion, where the supreme being is a balance of male and female, Allah, Buddha, all of them, they preach basically the same things, but in different ways and with morals and such that are slightly different based on location and the people. Their beliefs give power to their gods and, because they are all the same at the core, you'll find that that energy from all of those worshipers created a single and united entity that most in the know simply call 'The Supreme Entity', and then the evil side, so to speak, for his enemies. That's why I said 'the correct afterlife' when we first met," she ignored Harry's shocked expression and blinking eyes. "Unless we come out fully into the open, then it would be foolish to expect everyone to follow a set code of conduct, so we have multiple forms of the afterlife and paths souls can take afterwards, based on how they lived their lives. Anyway, I'll just call him 'Bob' for short. Now, Bob decided that he's going to help create a soul bond between you and your soulmate. He said he's going to do everything we can to make your soul bond as useful as he can."

"What's a soul bond," Harry asked, dreading the answer and deciding that a gods, goddesses, angels, demons and who knew what else was more confusion than he needed to worry about.

"It actually depends on you and your bond mate. Some get the ability to speak telepathically, some share emotions, memories or visions or even special abilities." She shrugged. "It just depends on the power of those in the bond and how it develops. The most common are telepathy, sensing each other and sharing emotions. Anything more than that is just random. The bond will create itself between you and your soulmate when the two of you acknowledge your mutual affection for one another. Nothing until then, though you can be close enough to sense each other without finalizing the bond since it's basically about being in tune with each other." Harry seemed contemplative.

"That ... Doesn't sound too bad, actually." He was thinking of the ways this could hurt Hermione and, aside from being stuck with him, he couldn't see much of a downside. Even that would only be if she decided to be with him and, if she chose that, she wouldn't leave him anyway, so it was basically just strong confirmation of what he already knew.

"Okay," he continued, "so what about that stone box?" Lora blinked blankly at him.

"What about it?"

"I haven't been able to open the bloody thing! What am I supposed to do with it? It just looks like a stone block." Lora palmed her forehead.

"You'll need two people to open it," she grumbled. "Your hands aren't large enough to do it by yourself. I forgot about that. Just have you and one other pull from the sides and it should open."

"Oh. Well, what's in it?"

Lora sighed and rested her chin in her hand. "Remember how I told you that you have the scroll that explained about how to remove the power-limiting seal?" Harry began shaking his head before he stopped suddenly and then smiled guiltily.

"I thought so," she said with a glare. "Look, you will need to gain access to more magic than you have now, but if you simply remove the seal that Grandpa Whiskers put on you, you will have more power than you can handle. It's just more than you've ever learned

to control," she said with a shrug. "So, inside of the box are bracelets that will serve several functions for you."

"Like what?" Harry jerked back and shook slightly when Lora glared at him.

"I was just getting to that!" She grumbled a second before shaking her head to get back on track. He was sure he heard something about probes and his butt. "They will do several things. They'll be mentally linked to you so that you can gain or limit access to your power until you learn to control more and more of it."

"That'll be helpful! I haven't been able to break through it yet!" He was suddenly whacked upside his head harshly. "Ack!"

"You idiot. If you'd broken through the seal, you would have been leaking magic out in waves too strong for you to control." Harry glared at his Death Angel and stuck his tongue out.

"At least I hadn't broken through yet. Anyway, does it do anything else?"

Lora glared a few seconds longer before sitting down on the couch with a thump.

"Yes. It will also grant you a battle armor that used to be used before wizards and witches learned to use wands. It was worn by a group called 'war wizards'. They have runes sewn into the whole outfit for a little defense, they aid you in manipulating your magic without the need of another device like a wand and generally provide various functions based on what type of armor it is. Don't think of it as actual armor, but more a uniform of various ranks in a military unit, each with their own use." Lora smiled ferally when she saw Harry's shocked expression. "The outfit will activate whenever you recognize yourself in a battle situation unless you actively keep it from happening."

"That's so cool!" Lora smiled at his enthusiasm. "Does the armor do anything specific?" He asked. Lora shrugged.

"Depends on what armor you get, really. It'll link to your magic and you could really get anything. They aren't perfect, of course. They won't grant you incredible abilities, but they enhance different



features for what you already have." Harry nodded, his eyes sparkling in happiness.

"Other than that, there is a meter that shows how much of your power you're accessing and that's about it." Harry smiled brightly at her.

"That's awesome! Thanks!"

"No worries. But you'll have to get another person to open it and, when you put it on, do it outside and keep anyone else inside, okay? It will probably release a strong wave of magic where it breaks the power-limiting seal and then seals it back up where you've got control over it. It won't damage the magic safeguarding this place, though. That's one of the reasons I mentioned it. Your family at the time was quite large and they all offered magic for the protections, so even you would be cutting it close. But, since your ancestors were the ones to raise the protective wards, they will feed on your magic rather than get damaged by it." Harry nodded.

"I can do that. I'll ask Hermione to do it tomorrow. Will it make me go unconscious or hurt or anything?"

"I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. "You've got a lot of power, so it may feel a little overwhelming ... But it shouldn't hurt since it's your own magic and it shouldn't knock you unconscious, but I suppose it could." Harry wasn't exactly confident, but if he died, it was going to be her fault this time.

"Alright. I'll deal with whatever happens, then. Other than that, how have I been doing so far?"

"Very well, actually. I missed a lot of your days because I was cashing in a bunch of IOU's with some other Death Angels to take over most of my clients so I could devote most of my time to you and switched Hermione's Death Angel with one of mine so I could keep track of her also, since she'd be around you so much, along with a few others that I know are your closer friends, but I caught a lot of what you've been up to so far, so I'm happy." Harry smiled proudly.

"Okay. So basically, I need to work on wards and anything I've come across to get his horcruxes. That about it for right now?" Lora nodded.

"Along with what you've been working on so far, yes." Lora got up and walked towards the wall before turning back to him. "And just so you know, I'll be popping up like this from time to time as I'm able and when I think you need me, but for the most part, I'll be watching only. Bob's creation of the altered soul bond sucked up a lot of the time I'll be able to spend with you," she said frowning. Curious, Harry asked why.

"Well, exactly how much help and interference we're allowed is a delicate thing. For instance, you told the goblins about the prophecy, which was me putting the suggestion in your head since they will be able to help you greatly. I can't do that too often. If we go over what we should to keep balance, considering how much information demons have given Voldemort, then they get to do more. But, the bond I mentioned earlier was changed by Bob for the sake of making it stronger." She frowned a little deeper as she remembered the event. "Strong enough to make him quite pleased, actually. So, where I had planned to show up every couple of weeks to talk and help guide you, I can now only show up maybe once a month, if that." Harry frowned and looked at her worriedly.

"Is this going to be anything I should be worried about?" Lora shook her head and smiled disarmingly at him.

"Nope. Just means you'll be closer, for the most part. Anyway, goodbye and I'll talk to you later." Without waiting for a goodbye from him, she strode through the wall as if it weren't even there, making it wave like ripples in a pond as she disappeared.

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Not long after Harry's enlightening conversation with a woman from beyond the grave, Emma was getting into bed with Dan, who'd arrived in time for dinner, obviously dying to know how the day with this boy he had yet to meet had gone. While Hermione had spoken in length about it, he was waiting for the right time to ask his wife what she honestly thought without the risk of offending his daughter.

"So," he said, getting under the covers, "how did the day honestly go? Hermione was rather happy about the day, but what about you?" Emma smiled at her curious husband and blinked rapidly.

"What makes you think the day wasn't as good as she said?" Dan simply mock glared, but the quirk of his mouth let her know he was enjoying the banter. "Oh, fine. From what I can tell, Harry's a very good boy. He was kind, very polite, seemed to value Hermione's opinions, except for when she asked about boxers or briefs," she snorted at the memory of Harry's embarrassment. "He even treated us to a late lunch for helping him out today." Dan leaned back into his pillow with a contented sigh.

"So you didn't see anything that seemed like this could be romantic, then?" He asked, almost sure of the negative answer at this point. Realizing he had let his guard down, Emma smirked in a manner not unlike a certain Malfoy.

"Oh," she said in a singsong voice, "I wouldn't say that." She laughed when he looked at her with a pathetically piteous expression. "Oh fine. I left for a few moments while he was trying on some clothes to pick out a new color of a shirt and when I came back, I caught them talking."

"Harry, really. You shouldn't say things like that. I know I'm not pretty, so you don't have to lie to me." Hermione was looking down partly pleased to have heard him say she usually looked pretty, and partly out of shame when no one has ever said such things and she believed them to be lies. Harry, however, not realizing that Emma was now eagerly watching through a rack of shirts, simply moved Hermione in front of the mirror on the door of the fitting room, unwittingly letting Emma see her daughter's face as they spoke.

"Look at yourself, Hermione. I mean really and honestly look. What do you see that makes you think you aren't truly pretty?" Hermione looked at her reflection for several moments, taunts from her past rising in her mind about her hair and her teeth, and general unpleasantness. Harry's presence seemed almost overwhelming, pressing her to speak and open up.

"I see a girl with thick, bushy hair," she said, looking down for a moment before looking up to Harry and then back at her reflection. "A girl who has overly large front teeth, ironic when her parents are both dentists, really. Too overbearing and always nagging the people around her to do their homework." She looked down, feeling ashamed of her emotions, but believing them to be truth

nonetheless. Harry simply nodded, a contemplative expression on his face.

"Wow you're blind," he deadpanned. Hermione looked at him in the mirror in shock as he pointed at the mirror to make her look at it again.

"I'll let you in on a secret," he said. "Your teeth will only seem big while we're small. As you get bigger, no one will even notice. But if it matters that badly to you, there's always a shrinking charm," he smiled at her as her eyes widened at the possibilities. He was just commenting the matter from remembering Draco making them grow while Pomfrey had spelled them smaller again. "Besides, your teeth don't matter. You've got a pretty smile." Hermione looked down with a blush as she smiled at the thought before looking up as Harry continued.

"Your hair is naturally you. It may be bushy, but it isn't like it's ugly. I sometimes wonder if magic may be a little like static electricity and you just unconsciously release tiny amounts or if it just courses through you to make it happen like that. Either way, it's still pleasant. And let's face it, your nagging is something I always thought was just you trying to push everyone to be better and keep us safe." Harry noticed her blush intensified a little, but continued, deciding that, even if they didn't end up together, he would still nip this way of thinking in the bud. She had reacted almost violently to his praise when he said he thought she would help him better than others because she always looked pretty. It honestly bothered him to see how upset hearing something like that had caused her to react.

"Of two things you think keep you from being pretty, there are a lot that make you so," he said quietly. "Whenever you're really happy, or feeling any intense emotion, your eyes do this really nice sparkly thing, and they're already very nice and expressive." Quickly, she looked up to her eyes and then back away from her reflection to look at the floor so he wouldn't see her massive blush. It was strange and wonderful to be scrutinized so thoroughly and not to be found wanting.

"You've got an incredible smile and you're one of the most gentle and loving people I've ever met. You care about everyone and everything, except maybe Malfoy," he smirked when she snorted in an ill-concealed laugh, "and you're not one of those useless girls

who are obsessed with boys and fashion and whatever girls like Lavender and Parvati get themselves in to. You're an intelligent girl, Hermione. While they saw me as The-Boy-Who-Lived, you took the time to honestly get to know me instead of constantly seeing an image created by people who wanted to sell books." He squeezed her arm gently as he continued.

"You're an incredible girl, Hermione, and these things you think make you not look pretty are honestly the only things that they can use, and that's probably only because of people who are terrified of you for being better than they are can use them as easy targets, simply because they're there to be seen at a glance, so they don't have to get to know you any more than they need to so they don't find out how great you really are. I'll admit you aren't the prettiest girl in school," he felt horrible to say it as her shoulders shook slightly at his admission, so he rushed to continue his comment.

"But you are pretty. All of those girls who pride themselves in their beauty and spend so much time on make-up and boys, they end up looking too pretty so that they look like toys and have very few redeemable qualities like you do. I can talk to you and actually have a real conversation, when I don't even know what Parvati and Lavender are talking about half of the time." Even from where he was standing beside and slightly behind her, he could see the blush all the way down her neck at this point. He could admit that she wasn't the most beautiful girl in the school, because she was a little plain in comparison, but he truly felt she was gorgeous when she smiled. Feeling a little mischievous, he reached around, cupping her chin and face gently, and lifted her head, making her look into her eyes that were almost in tears.

"See? Your eyes are doing that sparkly thing again," he told her gently, smiling. Then, he walked off to the side to start picking through shirts, raising his leg to check the colors to them against his pants, trying to look like what he had just done was an every day conversation, though Emma could tell he was flushing brightly at this point. Looking back at her daughter, she saw her look from Harry back to her reflection and smile, still blushing. Barely able to keep herself quiet, Emma squealed loudly in her mind for her daughter's lucky catch, even if she wasn't aware of it yet. She watched as Hermione took a few seconds to look at herself in the mirror again grinning shyly and helping him pick out a dark green shirt to try on.

Dan was silent a moment as he thought about what he'd heard his wife tell him before he responded. "Well, damn," he grumbled. "You mean he made her happy?" He sighed and groaned loudly. Emma simply smiled at her husband's antics, more than please with the boy so far. She reached over and kissed him soundly on the mouth, surprising him.

"You can grumble all you want, but I think he's a sweet boy for Hermione if it becomes serious."

'Which I really think it will,' she thought.

"Thank you, ever so much," he grouched. "I don't think I'll be able to sleep properly now, so instead, I think I'll complain a little m-OOG!" He was quieted by Emma placing another kiss on him.

"You talk too much," she said huskily before sliding her hand up the middle of his pajama shirt, unclasping each button. It took him only a moment to realize what she had in mind before he forgot all about Harry.

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"Alright everyone! I want you all to put your things away and then meet in the kitchen for lunch in an hour! After that, you'll get started on your homework!" Molly Weasley and her family had just entered their front lawn from their return portkey the next day and the woman was in full-dominance mode.

"Yes Mum," they all chorused together. The large crew marched upstairs and into their rooms, putting away dirty clothes, recently-bought knick knacks and mementos being placed on their shelves. Each was thrilled with their time away, but happy to be home after six weeks of being in another country. Sure, they had had a week and a half to get everything ready and themselves prepared, but nothing beat sleeping in your own bed.

Ron tossed his bags and clothes down at the foot of his bed, certainly not happy to put his things away or to take care of his dirty clothes. Instead, he pulled his school trunk out of his closet and sat down to write a letter to Harry and Hermione.

Harry

Hey mate, how's it going? We just got back from Romania where we got to see Charlie and his job as a dragon handler! We'll see if you can come to the Burrow soon. I wanna tell you all about it! It was great!

Mum's going to make us work on our homework for the summer after lunch, which really is stupid. We still have a whole month left! Nutters that.

Ron

Once he was done, he pulled out another parchment and scribbled a similar note to Hermione and sent them off with Errol. Meanwhile, Molly was in the kitchen making their lunch when she heard her name being called from the kitchen and went to check who had called.

"Oh! Albus. How are you?" The green face of Albus Dumbledore let out a relieve sigh as his fourth attempt at the floo found the Weasleys home.

"Excellent Molly, quite excellent," he said, not wanting anyone to know he'd lost Harry. "I wanted to be sure you arrived safely is all." Molly smiled at the man's thoughtfulness.

"Oh, we're quite good here, Albus. We arrived about fifteen minutes ago and everything is going quite well so-"

"FRED!" The voice of Ginny Weasley interrupted the Weasley matron before she could finish. "TAKE MY KNICKERS OFF OF YOUR HEAD AND GIVE THEM BACK!" Molly let out a frustrated sigh.

"THAT'S NOT FRED! I'M FRED!"

"Well, mostly well, at least." Albus chuckled, knowing he'd have heard from the woman if she or her brood had found Harry there.

"Very good. A word of warning, Molly. Sirius Black has escaped Azkaban nearly a week after you left. Be wary. He may learn of young Ronald's friendship with Harry." Molly looked stricken, but nodded.

"Thank you for the warning, Albus." Saying their goodbye's, Molly went back to her cooking with a new vigor while Albus began pacing his office. He had checked the Granger residence the day before, but the house was empty and nothing of Harry's appeared to be in any of the rooms and he was beginning to worry until Fawkes trilled merrily on his perch. With a new hope, Dumbledore walked over to the phoenix.

"Would you be willing to deliver a message for me, Fawkes?" With a happy trill, the old man rushed his desk to compose a quick letter, hoping not to let his desperation through on the parchment.

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## Chapter4 – Butterfly Effect

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Challenges: On my profile is a link to my FF (DOT) Net Forums. On those forums are challenge requests in the Harry Potter and Naruto universes. I'd greatly appreciate any views on those challenges or anyone who would like to accept them, feel free to let me know. I'd personally like to know if anyone finds them as decent plot devices or not. If you do accept a challenge, feel free to reply to the forum and let others know, preferably after you've posted the first chapter so they have something to visit and you can link to it.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry's Bond Part 1" by MioneFan (H/Hr - 2nd and 3rd out)

xXx STORY xXx

Hermione sat on the couch in her family's den, sitting across from her father who was reading a magazine on dentistry technology and keeping an eye on his daughter who had tried twice now to escape through the fiery floo of doom. Her right leg was resting on her left knee, shaking at a rapid pace that was keeping her book from being steady enough for her to even read.

"You sit there, keeping me from going over to Harry's and visiting his library and you've had that huge grin on your face ever since you woke up," she spoke, finally having enough of her father's oddities. "What's got you in such a good mood today?" Dan felt nervous for a moment, not wanting to even hint to his intelligent daughter what he and her mother had been up to the night before, thrice even.

"It's a good day, that's all," he said in a manner far too reminiscent of an aged headmaster she was familiar with.

"I still don't understand why you won't let me go over there yet. He did say I could come over at any time," she huffed.

"Hermione, I don't think he expected you to get up at six-thirty and try to go over there in your pajamas," Dan said delicately. Hermione growled, growled at him lightly in displeasure.

"I already changed and took a shower. It's already near noon!" Dan chuckled as Emma walked into the room, only just getting up after an exhausting night, and balked in surprise at seeing Hermione.

"Oh. Good morning Hermione, dear. I thought you would be at Harry's already." Hermione glared at her father anew and then spoke to her mother.

"For some reason, the grinning wonder here hasn't let me through yet." Emma laughed at Hermione and made a shooing motion with her hand and Hermione was up like a flash, only to disappear in a burst of green light. Curiously, she looked at Dan and asked the obvious question.

"Grinning wonder?" She asked her husband, noting that he was, indeed, grinning. Dan got up from his seat and enveloped his smiling wife in a hug.

"I haven't been able to get this grin off my face." To emphasize his point, he began nipping at her neck as she giggled.

"Let's go widen that grin," she pulled him with her towards the stairs.

'JACKPOT!' Dan picked up his wife and tossed her over his shoulder as she squealed in happiness and rushed towards the bedroom.

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"Harry!" Hermione called out moments after having come through the large fireplace at Harry's home. A pop in front of her made her jump slightly as Dobby appeared before her and rocked back and forth on his heels in happiness to finally have a visitor to Potter Manor.

"Hello. I am Dobby, house elf to the great house of Potter. Master Harry is being outside for his morning workout and cannot be answering you." Hermione blinked at the little excited creature, not having previously seen him.

"Oh. Hello Dobby," she said, reaching down to shake the diminutive hand in front of her. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Oh!" Dobby broke into happy tears. "Dobby knew Master Harry was a great wizard, but should have known Master Harry's Miss is being just as great as he is to shake Dobby's hand!" Hermione blinked rapidly, beginning to get a little worried.

"Erm, Dobby? Could you take me to where Harry is, please?"

Dobby nodded fast enough to cause a quick fwapping sound with his ears as he walked her through a hall and a few rooms to the back of the house where she saw Harry in nothing but shorts doing a series of pull-ups from a tree off to the side where Dobby was pointing. Her eyes widened considerably when she saw his muscles flex and bulge as he went up and down. She cocked her head to the side as she watched him go through several repetitions with his eyes closed for the additional concentration it seemed to provide. She continued to watch him for nearly another minute more before he opened his eyes and saw her watching him. Blushing all the way down his neck, he let himself drop and smiled sheepishly.

"Er, hi," he said. Hermione blushed and decided her safest bet was to act like she hadn't just watched him. Those nutrient and forced growth spurt potions seemed to have helped him a lot.

"Hello, Harry! Dobby said you were out here, so he showed me the way. Are you going to show me around?" Harry smiled as he slid his hand through his hair, desperately wishing for a shirt.

"Actually, Dobby could do that while I take a quick shower if you don't mind?" She shook her head and Harry called Dobby to do just that while he cleaned himself up. "Meet you in about fifteen minutes." He ran up to his room and took a quick shower while Hermione got an explanation over the grounds from the hyper house elf.

"Potter Manor has eight bedrooms, including Master Harry's room, the Head's study, the library, potions lab, baby nursery, game room, sitting room and kitchen, of course." Dobby said as they walked back inside. "There is also being eight smaller cottages used for extended family and guests around the river and pond and trees."

"Why are they so far out?" Hermione asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to keep them close?"

"According to the picture-wizard, when the house was being built, the Master at the time was not liking his Miss's parents and was wanting a way to keep them from visiting," Dobby said as if telling a dirty little secret, causing Hermione to giggle. "But also, there was being more Potters then, so they is wanting to be close like house elves, but is not wanting to lose privacy." Curious, Hermione looked at Dobby.

"What do you mean 'close like house elves'?" Dobby seemed surprised she wanted to know, but had no problems telling Master Harry's Miss about house elves.

"House elves is being very close, Miss. We is always wanting to be together with family but is not liking being alone. We sleeps together and eat together and spend time together when not doing our master's wishes," he said happily. "When a house elf is being doing a naughty thing, we is being punishing them by making them be alone for a short time and they is being better after. Most times." Dobby frowned as he considered those elves who did not reform after their time alone and shuddered.

"Most of the time? What happens if they remain the same?" Dobby flinched.

"If a house elf is being still bad, then they is not being allowed to be with us any more and we use house elf judging on them." Deciding she really didn't want to hear about what that may entail, as she was pretty certain, she changed the subject slightly.

"Harry mentioned you found a spot where the other elves lived. Did you ever find anything out about that?" She asked delicately, not sure if it would offend the excitable creature, especially after learning how close house elves seemed to be together. His ears drooped a little, but he shook his head.

"Dobby is not knowing what happened to the other Potter house elves. There is being no burial locations on the grounds and many of the things were taken away from the rooms." Hermione bit her lower lip as she went into deep-thinking-mode.

"Harry said he had more than one home but wasn't visiting them until later. Could they be at any of those? If there were things missing from here, then they may have taken them, wouldn't they?" Dobby's ears stuck straight up and his eyes widened as he thought about it. Potter Manor wasn't in very good shape when you consider the dust around it, but the only reason they would have been forced to leave would have been if they were supposed to protect themselves in some way by going to a particular residence.

"Oh! Yes, they could be doing that! House elves is losing our magic and dying when we are not bonded to a master and no house elf will allow themselves to belong to another when we is having a rightful master, so ownership would be going to Master Harry twelve years ago, so they would not be knowing they have a new master to be serving now!" Dobby was hopping up and down in excitement of thinking about it. His master only had plans to stay at this residence for the summer, so he had been spending his time cleaning it and taking care of Harry instead of going to each of the other houses since they would not be in use until the next summer at the earliest. And by agreeing to work for Harry with pay, instead of being bonded to him as a slave, even if that was what Dobby would have preferred, the other house elves would not have known of any changes in their bond to their master! Maybe he could use this as a way to get bonded like a proper elf? Dobby continued showing his master's Miss the rest of the manor with new enthusiasm as he made plans to be bonded properly to the great Harry Potter.

Several minutes later when they got to the Potter library, Hermione went googly-eyed. If Dobby hadn't known it was not possible in thanks to the girl's age, he would have thought she had teleported into the middle of the bookshelves. As it was, he watched as she moved with a speed and efficiency that nearly scared the little elf.

She was sitting at a table with an armful of ancient tomes, already reading happily when Harry walked in, his hair still damp. He stopped and stood amused as he watched her in what appeared to

be her element; sitting in a peaceful quiet, absorbing knowledge and ... was she cooing at the book in her hands?

Quietly, he snuck up behind her and wrapped his arms around her in a quick hug, making sure to keep his head from behind hers this time, and then looked at what she was reading. "Reading up on arithmancy, Hermione?" As soon as he said it, he realized he had forgotten to send his letter to McGonagall about changing his electives for the coming year.

"Well, I'm planning on taking the arithmancy course and thought this could give me a good start," she said defensively, causing Harry to squeeze her tightly for a moment before letting go and sitting next to her at the table in the plush chair.

"I know, don't worry. I'm actually going to owl McGonagall later to change my Divination elective to Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," he said to Hermione's surprise. "Divination is a subject that you either do or you don't, so there is no point in taking it and those are worthwhile subjects to take. I meant to send McGonagall a letter much earlier, but I guess I got sidetracked." Hermione beamed at Harry and hopped up and down in her seat.

"Oh! This is wonderful! I'll have someone to sit with in those classes and really," she waved her hand in a dismissive manner, "McGonagall said that Divination is a rather woolly subject anyway." Harry smiled at the vision of the future, or past in this case, that he would come to see. Maybe there actually was something to Divination after all?

"You're still taking it, aren't you?" He asked, sounding almost accusing. Hermione blushed lightly and would not look him in the eye as she responded.

"Well, it's always good to know your subjects, really." Both chuckled before fire erupted in the air a few feet away from them and a scarlet and gold phoenix landed on the table. Hermione stared at the bird in shock while Harry frowned. Dumbledore using Fawkes meant he had probably caught on to what Harry had done. And there had been an odd tingling just before he showed up.

"Fawkes? What are you doing here?" As if to answer, he held out his leg and Harry saw a letter there. As he began to untie the piece

of parchment, he continued to speak. "Do you mind waiting for a reply?" Fawkes trilled lightly as Harry finished and hopped over towards Hermione who was beginning to speak.

"That's a phoenix! They are very rare! Where did it come from?" Harry laughed as he unfurled the scroll and motioned towards Fawkes.

"He's Dumbledore's companion. He helped me out with the basilisk last year and brought me the Sword of Gryffindor. Go ahead and pet him. He's a shameless flirt." Fawkes trilled in agreement with Harry, almost prideful of the fact. As Hermione did just that, Harry read the note that was obviously written in Dumbledore's loopy scrawl.

Dear Harry

I hope this finds you well. I was sitting in my office when a device I use to keep me alerted to a very powerful protection ward that I had set up around your home began failing. At this point, it will fail in a mere three days.

This protection is only viable as long as you live with the Dursleys, Harry, and protects them and you from Voldemort and his followers by utilizing the blood protection your mother had given you as a child. You must spend time with them each year in order to recharge these wards.

I would like you to floo to Hogwarts and I can return you to the Dursley's. If you go to the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley, you can get some floo powder from Tom, the barman, and he will tell you how it works. Just say 'Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office' and you will return here. Or, you could simply go there yourself. Whichever works best for you, of course. I am aware that you may not want to return, Harry, but I ask that you trust me in this.

I also found that you emancipated yourself. I must warn you that the temptation to spend your parents' hard-earned money will be great, but you must endeavor to try and not go about spending such money on frivolous things.

Fawkes will wait for a reply of whichever option you choose so I know whether I should expect you or not.

See you soon,

AD

Harry frowned heavily and set the paper on the table while he thought about what he had read. The man's desperation was mildly amusing. Oh, sure he had not put in any words that would seem too much like he was begging or pleading, but that 'whichever works best for you' comment was not something he had really ever heard from the aged wizard. That he did so meant he had no idea where Harry was, which was as it should have been considering he only had himself, the Grangers, Sirius, Remus and people he knew would be friends later like Neville, Luna and Susan allowed for the time being. So, if all worked properly as it seemed to be doing, he shouldn't be able to think up the address or even hear when it was mentioned.

"What did Dumbledore send you?" Hermione asked. Harry handed Hermione the parchment and went over to a roll-top desk where blank parchment was held along with all the necessary implements for writing. By the time he got back to the table, Hermione was looking at Harry worriedly and frowning.

"Fawkes, would you mind delivering a letter to McGonagall as well as the reply to Dumbledore?" The bird bobbed his head, indicating his acquiescence to the idea and Harry penned both letters quickly.

Dear Professor McGonagall,

I would like to change my electives for this coming year. I signed up for my core classes plus Divination and Care of Magical Creatures. I would like to drop Divination and instead take both Ancient Runes and Arithmancy.

Two years out of two years, I have been forced to face Voldemort in spirit form along with a troll and a basilisk respectively. To be honest, Divination is not going to be a subject that helps me should such a thing come to pass again. I was forced into knowing absolutely nothing about my past, about my family, about magic or even about who I am and was expected to survive these encounters thanks to Dumbledore. I know you wanted to help be back then and weren't allowed, but this is within your power to help me for the future now.



I've looked into Muggle Studies and found it to be a joke. The information is either wrong or outdated by roughly a hundred years or more. I know more than enough about the muggle world (though I must ask why, since there are more students from muggle homes, there isn't a class for introducing these students to the magical world and communities. It would help us learn to deal with those in power, who have a strong tendency towards bigotry.) However, a three-year old generally has a better understanding of the muggle world than what the books actually state.

Divination is a subject where you either have the gift or you do not and, from what I hear, the teacher predicts a student's death quite often. As I'm likely to be a prime target (and with my history in Hogwarts, I cannot be sure she wouldn't be too far from the truth,) I don't want to take the class now that I have had an opportunity to learn a bit more about it.

Those are the only reasons I don't plan to ask to take those as well (along with scheduling issues, of course, though I feel I could take Muggle Studies NEWTS right now and pass without a problem.) I will need to be as ready as I can if something happens again and Divination will not do that.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I apologize for the inconvenience not having made the right decision to begin with is now causing you. I will see you September first.

Harry Potter

Once finished with that, he set it to the side, motioning for Hermione to take it when she indicated the desire to, and began Dumbledore's letter while she read.

Headmaster

I thank you for being concerned about me. But your concern is really unnecessary at this point, now. Being emancipated allowed me, just as you stated, access to my full inheritance. Because of this, I have more than enough money to support myself and I am in a very safe location.

You have told me about these wards that were around the Dursley residence before. Just after first year when I asked if there was any

way that I could leave them and you told me that there was not. I have failed to see what those wards protected me from, to be perfectly honest with you. I have been abused in that home and it was hell for me. You lied to me when you told me there was no way to leave them and you ignored my pleas for help. I was not protected from the Dursleys themselves, Headmaster, and so far, I've been safer when facing down trolls and basilisks than I was with them. I had a fighting chance against the things you didn't force me to stay with.

I will never be going back to them, Headmaster. I am both safe and content where I currently am. Being emancipated, I am immune from the underage use of magic restriction and as such, can not get in trouble if I find myself forced to protect myself, so long as I be sure to follow the statute of secrecy restrictions.

Let's face it. In two years since coming into the wizarding world and under your so-called 'protection', I have been forced to face Voldemort twice. Once each year. While you could say it is all the more reason to worry about the protections, you have specifically said that they were wards around the Dursley home and those only protect the location, not me when I leave. I've looked into those things. I freely admit there could be more to it than I am aware, but I'm willing to take my chances.

I will always accept your advice, but decisions about my life are mine to make.

Harry Potter

As he finished, he handed the letter to Hermione, knowing she would want to know what it said as well. He waited a few moments while she read and then looked at him with a somewhat distressed expression.

"Harry, I know you said not to ask and that you would tell me when you were ready, but I have to at least try. Are you sure you are doing the right thing?" Hermione winced when Harry leveled narrowed eyes at her. He had never actually glared at her before and she realized it kind of scared her. She was used to Ron glaring and saying mean things to and about her, but Harry never had aside from shirking his homework duty. Thankfully, the look only lasted a

second before his expression softened and he sighed.

"Hermione, the Dursleys starved me, beat me, allowed my aunt Marge's dogs to bite me and chase me up trees as they laughed or got angry with me when I bled on their flowers, Dudley and his friends would play a game where they would chase me down and then hit me and I was forced to do all of the chores save for a few in the kitchen that Petunia said was hers to do. Aside from that, I lived in the cupboard under the stairs until last summer when they were worried I could do magic and they gave me Dudley's second bedroom and I didn't know my real name until I started school and the teacher told me." Harry looked at Hermione and noticed her pale and shocked face, but continued anyway.

"Tell me, if there is all of that, which was a constant, and I don't even have one happy memory with them, why would I want to go back to them?" Hermione swallowed thickly before reaching over and giving him a Weasley-worthy hug.

"Why didn't you ever say something," she sobbed. "I may have been able to get my parents to let you come over for whatever summer the Weasleys couldn't, and they were always willing to have you too." Harry hugged her back before releasing her and sitting her in her chair.

"I was ashamed of it, to be honest. I didn't want to deal with it any more than I needed to and, since Dumbledore was the only person I knew that could actually help and he said no, I didn't really feel like there was anything I could do, so I didn't bother," he said with a shrug. "It didn't occur to me that Dumbledore is my headmaster. Nothing more. He doesn't have the right to say where I live and he went against my parents' will to actually put me with the Dursleys, so he went against the law, which he is supposed to head, and I decided that there's nothing to do with him that I don't want there to be." He quickly tied Dumbledore's note to Fawkes' leg and then put McGonagall's in Fawkes' beak.

"Please deliver McGonagall's first and I'll see what I can do about bringing some plums after the first for you." Fawkes trilled happily and shot up before disappearing in a burst of flame. Once gone, Harry turned to Hermione and smiled. "How would you like to help me open a box?"

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Minerva McGonagall was finishing up the letters that would be going out this summer to the students when a burst of flame erupted over her desk. Several years of working with Albus Dumbledore had numbed her to the surprise his companion used to evoke in her. However, when the finicky buzzard simply dropped off a letter and then disappeared into flames again, her curiosity was aroused and she picked it up.

After reading, she had a confused smile on her face. Harry's letter gave her mixed signals. Parts of it mocked the school and its educational material, though she felt she had to agree, particularly with the idea for an introduction to the wizarding world, and part of it made some extremely good points about his education.

"Well, Mister Potter," she said, making the necessary notes to go to the right people, "let's see if Miss Granger can make a respectable scholar out of you, shall we?" She smiled to herself, somewhat curious about what Hermione had done to manage to get Harry to take the harder courses.

"I think I need to get with the Weasley twins. I need to place my bet before it's too late." Smirking, she wrote a letter to them and sent it out with a school owl while Dumbledore was reading the letter that Harry had sent to him.

As he got to the end of Harry's letter, he was able to recognize that the only way he could get Harry back to the Dursleys would be to break his emancipation and that would simply take too long. Harry failed to even mention his concerns towards the Dursleys. The boy seemed to be harboring a hatred for them now, and that hatred could lead to far worse. Sighing, Dumbledore sat in his chair behind his desk and thought of the options available to him. There weren't many.

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"So, what's in this box is going to make you stronger?" Hermione watched as Harry sat the stone box he just got from Dobby on the table and looked at it critically. It didn't seem like there was any way to open it.

"No," Harry said, pointing a finger in a frighteningly close version to McGonagall during one of her lectures. "Dumbledore placed a power-limiting seal on me when he put me with the Dursleys because he knew that they hated magic and, when I was able to do magic after arriving, thought that I had already broken through it, but I hadn't." He pointed at the box and then looked at Hermione again.

"What is inside are two bracelets that will change the power-limiting seal into one that I can control so that I can choose how much power I have and don't have access to at any given moment." Hermione nearly argued about Harry's statement about Dumbledore and his magic being bound, but could see it as a strong possibility.

The day before while they were talking away from her mother, he had put all of the odd circumstances of their first and second year in a new light from how she had originally thought them over. The first year's challenges before facing Voldemort seemed hard at the time, but after looking back, not a single one of those should have stopped a dark wizard. And Lockhart alone was bad enough last year. But add into account that Dumbledore did absolutely nothing to stop the rumors of Harry being the Heir of Slytherin and it raised serious questions. Admittedly, it was all conjecture, but it made far more sense than seeing them as honestly difficult challenges. How had Quirrell managed to make it past the chess set without defeating it first? All of the pieces had been whole.

"Where did you get these from?" She asked, deciding to ignore her previous thoughts for now. Harry frowned before answering slowly.

"A friend gave them to me. I can't tell you more than that until we've had a chance to practice our occlumency against each other. What I know can't be told to anyone I don't trust fully and, quite frankly, I know that Snape and Dumbledore both scan the students with legilimency regularly, so I am not too fond of the idea of letting them risk finding it out yet. I just don't trust them enough." Hermione frowned and looked at Harry instead of the box.

"Harry, Professor Snape-

"Hermione," Harry said forcefully. "I ... know things. Things that I can't explain yet." Harry looked away from Hermione, not wanting to see the look of hurt on her face.

"You know you can trust me with this, right? I would never betray you," she told him quietly. Harry smiled at her and scooted his chair closer to hug her tightly. He knew her far better than to think she would ever do that to him. They had been through too much and, even though this Hermione had not yet been through all of those same things, she was still the same woman he had come to know.

"I know you wouldn't," he said into her ear, still hugging her. "But I have to be extremely careful with this knowledge. I plan to tell you everything I can once I'm sure that our minds can't be broken into and our secrets taken. This isn't just my choice. I am under restrictions and you are currently the only person, aside from maybe Dobby, that I would trust with all of my secrets."

Hermione had allowed herself to be drawn into the hug with Harry because she wanted to feel comforted when she thought he felt she wasn't able to be trusted, but he had totally blown that out of the water with his sweet comments. And the boy was almost never affectionate. At least not physically. Until that hug in the Great Hall after she was unpetrified was the first time he wasn't as stiff as a board during a hug, and now he was initiating them, just like right after getting off the train after arriving in King's Cross. But some of what he said worried her.

"What kind of restrictions?" She asked, staying in his hug and hugging him back. "Is someone making you do something you don't want to do?" As her thoughts followed that trail of possibilities, she pulled back to look into his smiling face.

"Not really, but they are restricting how much I can tell, but they have a very good reason and I agree with it." Hermione frowned, still unsure. "Regardless, grab an end of this thing and pull so we can open it up, alright?"

Curious, she did as asked and the stone box pulled apart slowly, Harry getting an end with the four long corners and Hermione getting the other end with each of the four sides on hers.

Once pulled apart, two stone bracelets levitated in the air the box had been occupying between them. They looked like they had a gold sheet of metal inside that went against the wearer's skin and covered in runes while the rest was a somewhat lighter shade of

gray than the box it was in. The entire outside was smooth as a river stone would be, but on both was a large rectangle created of three lines of very small runes. They were both about three inches long and about as plain as could be other than that.

"That's it?" Hermione looked at them in confusion. Aside from floating on their own, there wasn't really anything remarkable about them. Harry simply shrugged.

"I suppose so. I'm going to go outside and put them on. You can watch, but I need you to stay inside and-"

"What? Why?" Hermione couldn't help but feel like she was being left out of pretty much everything that Harry had to do recently and was certainly not fond of the idea. Harry grabbed the bracelets and looked at Hermione, noticing how she felt.

"I've done my homework with these, actually. I would like you there with me, but there is going to be a massive burst of magic where these destroy the power-limiting seal and then rebind my magic. But before it's rebound, it will be wild. The house has protections on it," he said, gesturing around the room, "but you won't be safe out there. I don't know how bad it will be. I've never had to control that much of my magic at once." Hermione looked between Harry and the bracelets several times quickly before finally relenting.

"Are you sure you can trust whoever gave those to you?" She asked, showing her well-founded concern. Harry nodded.

"Very much so. She's already proven that she wants to help me." Hermione watched Harry walk away as she tried to figure out the feeling of anger she got when she realized some other girl was helping Harry. It didn't take her long to realize, with some amount of shock, she was jealous.

'Bloody hell! The boy flirts with me a little bit and I already get territorial!' She followed him through the halls silently until she got to the glass doors and watched him walk a small distance into the yard. 'If this is any indication of what I am going to be facing this year, I am so screwed.'

She watched as Dobby popped into existence next to Harry and speak with him momentarily before disappearing, only to pop into

existence next to her. She only spared him a glance as she noticed Harry was beginning to put the bracelets on. Once on, he seemed to look at them without knowing what to do before they pulsed a brilliant blue light and then he threw his head back and let out a silent scream.

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Across the country, back in Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore felt a wave of magic hit him that he recognized as Harry's unique signature. Fawkes, who had been sitting on his perch sleeping awoke with a start and began flapping his wings wildly and squawked in surprise and righteous indignation of his senses being overwhelmed. The multitude of baubles and meters scattered about Dumbledore's office began to emit random results before the wave disappeared several seconds after it began.

"Merciful Merlin!" He rushed into a hidden room behind a swing-away bookshelf and checked the wards around the school, finding them to be stronger than he had ever seen them and the school itself humming with power through his link with it. Shocked and confused, he left the room and sat in his chair once again, noticing Fawkes was now gone once again. He had only a few moments to ponder quietly before his door was thrust open and Minerva was standing there, obviously out of breath and her hair severely mussed.

"Albus! Did you feel that! That was Harry's magic! I would know it anywhere!" He motioned to the chair in front of his desk, which she gratefully accepted.

"I did, and it was. Alas, I have absolutely no idea as to what happened." He popped a lemon drop into his mouth, only to notice the calming drought each was laced with seemed to no longer be active. He would have to see about that later.

"Albus, how could we have felt that from here? It's rare for a witch or wizard to produce a physical aura of power strong enough to be felt from even a hundred yards, and I am quite sure he is much further away than that!" McGonagall was really quite terrified for her lion. A release of that kind of power would normally result in self-destruction, and even then, she would have had to have been close to have felt it, but she knew he was nowhere on the grounds at the very least, and that was easily far enough away so that she shouldn't have felt



such power. There were some things that would make a person's magic radiate out like a ping or a brief burst, but it was just that: brief! That wave had lasted easily fifteen seconds.

"I know, Minerva," Albus sighed. "I just sent young Harry a letter with Fawkes asking him to come to me here, or return to the Dursleys and a few minutes later," he trailed off, gesturing around to indicate the wave of power.

"That would explain why Fawkes delivered Harry's letter to me rather than Hedwig. I was rather curious about that. What about the wards of the school? A wave of that magnitude surely weakened them severely." Albus shook his head.

"Quite the opposite, actually. I just checked them and they are stronger now than they have ever been since I have been able to gauge them," Dumbledore said, his voice showing his astonishment. Minerva looked absolutely flabbergasted.

"How is that possible! Wards don't work that way! Any attack on them should have weakened them, that wave of magic especially!" Albus shook his head again, feeling lost himself.

"I do not know, Minerva. Only the magic of the creator of the wards or one entrusted with their maintenance should be able to do such a thing, and even I have never had enough power to strengthen the wards to such a degree. I believe they are as strong, if not stronger, than at the time of their creation." Minerva shook her head along with Dumbledore, unsure of what this all meant.

"I feel we should send a letter to make sure he is okay." Without waiting for a response, she pilfered one of his blank parchments and his favorite quill to begin a note for Harry. "Fawkes! Get your feathered butt back here!" Albus flinched at his Deputy Headmistress' protective instinct coming out. The flinch made him look behind her and he noticed an empty case.

'Where's Godric's sword?'

Meanwhile, in the Burrow, the entirety of the Weasley clan was at their table, some eating more like a starving man than others, when they felt the burst of energy rush through their home. Each one

stopped eating and looked about, able to feel the magic course through them.

"What in the world is that!" Molly looked about as if looking for the source of the disturbance somewhere in the kitchen.

"I don't know," Arthur told her. "Whatever it was, it doesn't seem to be causing any trouble. Perhaps we'll find out in the Daily Prophet tomorrow." The Weasleys went back to their meal, though Fred and George both thought the wave of whatever it was, seemed to be familiar.

Across wizarding Britain, witches, wizards and the multitude of magical creatures were able to feel the wave of raw power for several long moments before it eventually died down. The only real difference being that those who were capable of deep and intelligent thought would later recognize it when they came across its source later.

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"Let me out! I have to help him!" Hermione was pulling and jerking on the handle of the door while screaming simultaneously at Dobby, who looked as terrified as she did. The difference, however, was that he was given orders to stay here and keep his master's Miss inside until the wave was done.

"Dobby is being sorry, Miss, but Master Harry is saying that Dobby is to keep you inside until-" He was cut off by the aura of magic suddenly stopping and Harry fell to the ground. Immediately, he popped to Harry and Hermione rushed out of the door to Harry who was shaking his head.

"Harry!" Hermione launched herself onto him and grabbed him in a strong hug before pulling back and checking him over for damage. "Are you okay? Why did you make Dobby lock me in the house! You could have been killed!" Harry chuckled and pulled her down into a hug and squeezed hard to get her to stop talking and because he was half worried he had been about to wake up in Lora's office again.

"I'm fine. It didn't hurt, but I could feel all of my magic trying to escape. It took almost everything I had to keep it from lashing out."

He groaned as Hermione helped him up. "It is going to take a long time to learn to control all of that." He stretched his back and popped his neck. He told her it had not actually hurt, but that was more for her benefit. It had actually felt like he was about to burst or blow up and felt rather stiff.

He looked at the bracelet on his left wrist and saw that the rectangle now had a display of information. On the upper left corner was a number two while the right half had an arrow pointing up. The one on his right wrist had a blank face, still.

"Harry, what's that?" Hermione asked, indicating a black stick-like thing on his left side. Spinning him over, she saw it was a scabbard. Harry blinked in surprise and pulled out the sword, noticing the familiar blade of the Sword of Gryffindor. "How on earth did that get on you?"

"I dunno. Maybe it has something to do with being a blood heir of Gryffindor or something," he shrugged. "It's never happened before, so I'm not sure." He wasn't kidding, either. It had never just appeared like that before. Even in his previous lifetime.

"It was called by your magic, Master Harry," Dobby said beside him as they walked into the mansion. "You are being the heir of Gryffindor so the sword will be answering your call." Both Hermione and Harry stared at the bouncy creature as he pulled them towards the house. Once they entered, they found Errol and a shaken-looking Fawkes.

"Looks like you've got more letters," Hermione pointed out. Harry chuckled and snagged the letters. Ron's was about as minimalistic and simple as they got. They were back and he was looking forward to the school year. McGonagall's was more informative.

Mister Potter,

First, let me congratulate you on your academic changes. I have made the necessary alterations. Make sure you try to stay on top of things.

Another reason I am writing this is because I want to make sure you are doing well and to ask if anything odd has happened with you recently.

M. McGonagall

Harry frowned and decided to send a thank you note for the changes and to assure her he was fine.

Hey Harry

We just got back from Egypt. It was great. We got to see all sorts of tombs and pyramids and things. I didn't really care about all the stuff Bill said about them, though. I was hoping to find one that they didn't yet and score some treasure, but Bill said that it would still belong to the curse breakers and stuff.

I got you a foe glass and Hermione a book. I made sure it doesn't have pictures, so she should like it. There wasn't a lot to do. So I'm glad to be home. Nothing like sleeping in your own bed at your own home.

Ron

Harry shook his head at Ron's letter. It was identical to the one he remembered getting from his past. Or at least as much as he could remember it actually saying. It was quintessentially Ron. Short, to the point and just about meaningless. But it was the thought that counted.

Hey Ron,

Glad to hear that you are back and about. I'm looking forward to hearing about Egypt.

There have been a bunch of changes on my side. I will tell you more when we meet up. I'll be going to The Leaky Cauldron for the last week of break and we can meet up there some time and catch up. I have a lot to talk to you about.

Tell your family I said hi,

Harry

Ron put Harry's note on the table and ran outside to play Quidditch with the twins. He would see and speak with Harry in a couple of

weeks, so he didn't bother with another letter to him. If he needed anything, he could always send Hedwig.

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Two weeks later found Harry waking up in his room at the Leaky Cauldron for his first day staying in Diagon Alley. Hermione would be showing up later that day with Ron showing up the next day with most of Hogwarts for their supplies, before they all left for the Hogwarts Express in the three days after. By this point, he was finally off of the potion to induce his growth spurt, but was going to be forced into taking the nutrient potions for the remaining three weeks left that the growth spurt itself would last. Harry was extremely thankful to be off the potions as his lower back had been causing him untold amounts of grief with the stretching the muscles had to do. He would have to go on one again the next summer to fully make up for a decade of poor growth, but for now, he was done.

Harry had added another few inches to his height, giving him a full foot from when he left Hogwarts the year previous bringing him to a full five feet and eight inches and, while he was still lanky, his body had matured and filled out in an admirable manner thanks to the potions he had been taking to do just that and the copious amount of exercise he had been doing. While he certainly looked fit before, he was now in better shape than even before he was tossed back in time, which he hoped would give him a large advantage for the things to come. He would be lucky if he could break the six foot barrier this time around.

Harry had met Sirius just like he remembered having done in the previous timeline four days before. The only difference was that he had decided not to take his trunk with him and he smiled at the man-turned-dog instead of acting terrified of him and Harry had made sure to leave a large order of take-out where he had shifted from to go back to his room at the Cauldron and slept, knowing they would be meeting again soon enough. Harry had wanted to do more, but didn't want to change too much with Sirius. While it was bad that he came to Hogwarts for Peter Pettigrew, who was still hiding out as Ron's rat Scabbers, it would offer the best way to free him as well. Harry was hoping he didn't tip the rat off too soon, though. He had wanted the man dead for too long to just act like nothing was wrong when around him.

Finishing his morning ablutions and eating a quick breakfast in the main area of the Leaky Cauldron, Harry hurried out and into Diagon Alley to pick up some things for the coming year and to get some things he had been planning on getting for most of the summer.

Harry walked into the trunk shop and looked around for several minutes to see what kind of trunks were available. As he made his way around, he saw a small book that showed their options and, finding what he needed, he rung the little bell on the counter to bring an old and heavily wrinkled man to the register.

"I'm John, owner of this little trunk shop. How may I help you?" He eyed Harry up and down, curious about why the boy would be in the shop before the usual Hogwarts rush of students and parents.

"I'd like to order some specialized trunks," Harry said happily. The shopkeeper frowned.

"What kind of trunks are you looking for?"

"I have a friend who collects a rather large number of books and I want to give her a trunk like the one over there," he said, pointing at the apartment trunks, "so that she can have a large library room for all of her books. I'd also like it to be able to accommodate several people inside so that there can be a sitting room inside the library room."

"We don't offer furniture, boy. You'll have to buy that separate," John grunted. Harry nodded, showing that was okay.

"Not a problem. I also want another room to be open for a potions lab, three bedrooms, a kitchen, a loo, a standard living space, a storage room and then also one compartment that is just like a normal Hogwarts school trunk that can be opened from outside. I would also like every safety spell and charm you can think of to put on it and the strongest security charms as well." The old man behind the counter whistled. He knew who Harry was, but that didn't mean he was like the hundreds of others that were starstruck over the boy, so he knew Harry could afford it. Still, that was a large order to fill.

"That's some order you've got there. Any particular reason you want all of these things? The Ministry frowns on offering these kinds of things to minors, especially with the intent of muggleborn having

them in their homes. I know you've got the gold for it, but ...," Harry waved the issue aside as the man trailed off, obviously unsure how to continue.

"I'm emancipated, sir. So there should be nothing legally holding you back. I'm getting this for a friend because, like I said, she loves books. But, she has muggles over often and she's running out of room for her books where they can all remain hidden. Also, she's quite good at potions, but she can't have a cauldron sitting around where just anyone could see it when they are at her home. The rest is because she likes to go on holiday with her family and this will allow her to remain comfortable at any time." John, the old man behind the counter nodded. He had to be sure none of the plans were illegal and, while anyone can certainly lie about why they wanted the trunk like that, Harry had eased his discomfort at the prospect.

"Well, that is a lot of work. I've got to do stabilizing charms so none of the stuff inside gets bounced about when the trunk is moved, ventilation and banishment charms for the fumes in the potions room, anti-theft, anti-fire, feather-light and unbreakable charms and a whole mess of others." He raised his hands up and shrugged. "I'm afraid I can't have this done for several hours at least. But certainly by the end of the day." Harry nodded.

"Time isn't much of a problem. This is for Christmas, so there is plenty of time," Harry said.

"Alright then. Now, we've recently developed a way to have the rooms for apartment trunks, or any trunk you enter actually, where you just go from compartment to compartment as if each was a room with a doorway like normal. It's a bit more pricey by five whole galleons because it's a highly advanced series of charms and rune work, but it keeps you from having to get out of the trunk to go back in, no matter the number of compartments the trunk is to have. It's the same that we do as when you open the trunk from the outside, but we use runes so it works from within what already exists inside the trunk. Would you like that feature?" Harry's eyes widened.

"Most certainly! But, can this be done with different trunks? Not just a single one? I plan to get a trunk similar to this one for myself as well and it would be nice to be able to visit each other like that where

we can travel between the trunks." John thought for a moment. The possibilities were tremendous if he could!

"To be honest, I've never tried it. It's never come up before and I had never thought of using it like that before. I had thought of using it like that in a way for a new form of wizarding travel," he nodded before finishing, "and to be honest, I have to have both compartments close enough to point my wand at, so it wouldn't have worked for that, but I never thought of putting it on two trunks. I don't see any reason it won't work, though. Distance in general don't matter to this charm since they work with spacial expansion anyway," he continued a few moments talking more to himself than Harry if his technical jargon he was beginning to spout off was any indication. As far as Harry could tell, the man was either one of those crazy types of geniuses, or just crazy.

"So you think it would work?" Harry asked carefully, looking forward to the possibilities. John nodded emphatically.

"I do, actually. And since you gave me the idea, I'll only charge you once for doing it to both trunks." Harry smiled and nodded.

"Deal! But one thing," he asked. "If you can do it to whatever you can point to, could you maybe make two doorways and just charm those instead of trunks? That would work for your wizarding travel thing, wouldn't it?" John's eyes widened as the man coughed in surprise. It was so simple! Why hadn't he thought of it before!

"If it works on your trunks, there wouldn't be any reason it wouldn't work like that! I never thought of using simple doorways that can then be installed wherever you want 'em!" Harry laughed at the old man's obvious enthusiasm, silently deciding it was just crazy, not crazy genius.

"Well, I tell you what. If you can figure out a way to do that, the doorway method I mean, and get it to work for only specific people so that not just anyone can go from the one I'd put at her house to my own, then I'll pay you a hundred galleons for each doorway." John's coughing started anew as the amount started coming to mind. That was the equivalent of fifty-thousand pounds for each doorway!

"I say that because I may want more than just two where I can connect them all together, so if you can add a feature where new



doorways can be added to pre-existing ones, I'll pay you a thousand galleons for the idea and even fund you as a secondary business so that you can keep your trunk shop as well. But I would need to have that feature for the doorways to work for my needs." Harry was just as pleased as John. If the doorways alone worked, then he could give some to the Weasleys, Grangers, Lovegoods and all the other families that were attacked after Voldemort came back to power in the previous time line. Especially to those who weren't allowed to fight back either because of the age restrictions or lack of magical ability in the case of many of the parents. Until then, however, it would be a safe route of escape for those he knew he could trust with entrance to his home, which was basically the families he had thought of by name. He still wasn't sure what he could do about Molly and Ginny, but felt he could keep out of it by admitting feelings for her as nothing but a sister, publicly, and romantic feelings for Hermione.

"M-Mr Potter! I am sure I can do that and I would gladly accept the funding!" Harry nodded happily.

"Very well. Then if you can figure that out, let me know and I will allow my account's manager at Gringotts know what you have to work with you." John nodded happily while they determined what Harry would be getting.

"Okay," John began several minutes later, looking over their notes. "You want two trunks. One with a very large library room that is large enough for roughly ten thousand books comfortably and table and chairs for up to ten people and both trunks are to have a large living area, three good-sized bedrooms, large kitchen, potions lab, storage room about the size of my building, dueling room, loo's in each bedroom and one for general use and a standard Hogwarts compartment that can be opened from outside to appear normal." Harry nodded.

He could tell John was a bit suspicious of the number of books, but when they were running around during what would have been his seventh year, Hermione had wanted to haul around every book they could safely carry and this would allow that, and comfortably at that.

"Alright. Then you want the new transportation doorways I mentioned and every safety and security charm I can possibly add. Also, you'll be wanting the feather-light charm and auto-sizing

feature since your friend can't use magic outside of school yet ... Have I missed anything?" Harry frowned in thought before shaking his head.

"That should be everything."

"Alright. Then for both trunks, rooms, charms and everything combined, it will come to one hundred and twenty-three galleons, fourteen sickles and two knuts." Harry handed the shocked clerk his Gringotts card and told him to add an additional ten galleons for his help. Smiling, John rushed to the door and turned the sign to closed.

"I'll be working on these all day, sir. You should be able to come by any time after noon tomorrow and pick them up. Is that agreeable?" Harry nodded. "Excellent. Then I will need two drops of your blood to set the security wards as I make the trunks. After that, you will be the only one able to add people to the trunks at any point."

"What about my friend's trunk?" Harry asked curiously. John held up a finger as he replied with a proud smile.

"You will either need to bring me a drop of your friend's blood some time in the next," he paused as he thought, "four or so hours so I can have it by the time I start on the second trunk as I'll be doing yours first, or allow yourself on it and then add her later. I'll have the directions written down for you regardless. That was what I planned to do and why I asked for two drops of blood instead of just one. My charms are some of the strongest around, legal blood magic that is actually a derivative of the work you'll find at Gringotts." Harry nodded.

"Alright, I'll just add her later. It would be a little hard to get her blood without telling her why first," he said. He was also thinking about how he didn't want anyone to have her blood when he was aware of what could be done with it, even if it was only being asked for to complete something he wanted. Besides, it was always good to have another person capable to open the trunk anyway.

"Very good then. Do you have any other business to complete with me today?" Harry shook his head and the two parted ways as Harry made his way towards a furniture shop to look at what was available to outfit Hermione's trunk with since they would be done with the

next day and able to be filled. However, about halfway to the shop, he was tackled to the ground.

"Ack!" Harry rolled over and moved a little bushy brown hair over so he could look at Hermione's impish grin. "Hello to you too." Harry said with a happy smirk. Hermione smiled and helped him up as her parents walked up to them laughing.

"Now that was funny!" Dan was still laughing when his wife whacked him on the shoulder and Hermione wrapped Harry in a proper hug now that he was up.

"Good morning Harry," Emma said apologetically. "Hermione couldn't sit still at home so we decided to come a little earlier. And as Hermione was so eager to point out, the owls should be able to find her here so that she will be close to get her things." Harry grinned at them all as he hugged Hermione back and released her. He was happy to note that she only let him go after he did first.

'Ha! Progress!' He thought with a mental cry of triumph. He found he was looking forward to the day he could call her 'girlfriend'.

"Don't worry about it, Missus Granger. I just got done with the only thing I had to do today that I wanted to keep secret anyway," he said, eying Hermione from the corner of his vision as she narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"And just what did you need to keep secret, Mister Potter!" She mock glared at him and latched onto his arm as if daring him to try and escape. Harry simply burst out laughing and grinned down at her.

"Christmas for the most brilliant witch I know!" Whatever Hermione had expected, which was really anything when it came to Harry at this point, that was certainly far down on her list. Her face slackened and she blushed lightly as she realized she had been coming on a little strong again.

"Oh." She said, surprised. Harry laughed and pulled her towards the book store, deciding to hold off on furniture for now so that it could be something he could try to get her to let him help her with later. Part of him was a little unsure about setting up all of the different situations to spend time with her. It was a little like he was playing

with her emotions. But he had decided that, as long as he held no plans to hurt her and he wasn't just leading her on, that it would not be a problem as long as she was agreeable to it.

That ... and if they were together by next summer, which was the most likely time they could get furnishings for the trunk, maybe he could get reward kisses!

It was a very widely-grinning Harry that held the door open for the Grangers.

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Dobby popped into the living room of the Potter home at Godric's Hollow and looked about. He could see where things had been taken from the home, probably by Dumbledore, and scorch marks along the walls that were faded with age. Dust and leaves were everywhere in the little cottage upstairs from a large hole that was in the nursery and let in through the obliterated doorway. He could feel charms and wards put up to keep bugs, rain and animals from coming inside.

Recognizing that there would be no house elves there with the amount of unfixed damage and dirt everywhere, he was about to pop away to the next location when he saw the crib in the corner. Curious, he stepped up to it, paying homage to the memory of what had happened there. Underneath the ratty and dirty pillow, he saw a brown piece of cloth sticking out. He picked it up to find that it was a stuffed animal; a stag, with its left antler nearly chewed through.

"You must have belonged to Master Harry," he told the still animal in his hands. "Dobby is knowing what to do. Dobby is fixing you and giving you to Master Harry." He turned away from the crib and began to walk out of the room so as not to disappear in a room with so much history, but stopped at the door and turned back to face the room.

"Dobby is thanking Mistress Lily for loving and protecting Master Harry. Dobby is not wanting you to worry. Dobby will always be protecting and keeping Master Harry safe now. This Dobby promises to Mistress Lily," he said quietly before turning and walking back to the living room. When he learned what happened to the

other house elves, he would bring them back to fix the house as a surprise to Master Harry.

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"Harry! Our letters have shown up!" Hermione pulled off the two letters from the owls that had shown up on their lunch table in the Leaky Cauldron while Harry offered them some of the bacon from his bacon-lettuce-tomato sandwich, which they happily took. Hedwig, who was resting on a beam reserved for mail owls in the rafters, hooted warningly. She had already eaten her fill of bacon from her human, but she would be damned if some other bird came in and took her human's treats!

"Everything look like it normally does?" Harry asked as she looked at her letter and handed him his.

"Looks that way, though it says we'll need rune etching kits and the angry little book that tried to take a bite out of the shopkeeper at Flourish and Blotts!" Hermione exclaimed, sounding properly scandalized. "They actually expect us to use that thing! It tried to take his hand!" Harry laughed at her. There were some things his future knowledge would be amusing for. And keeping the book from trying to eat his shoes again was one of them.

"Just stroke its spine before opening the clasp and that will calm it down." Hermione eyed Harry curiously for a moment. He seemed to know little things like this more and more in the past couple of weeks she had been spending with him. He spoke knowledgeably about the classes they shared, more than she had thought he knew before the summer had started and little things like this. At first, she thought it may have been something to do with staying with the Dursleys and them making sure he would not perform well, but that couldn't be the case anymore. There were just too many little things. He spoke with her about NEWT level transfiguration only four days ago! And it wasn't just the knowledge that was making her curious, so much as it was him keeping up with her in a discussion and, as far as she could figure out, it was as though he was thinking faster and in greater depth.

"How did you know to stroke its spine?" She asked curiously. Harry looked surprised she asked before shrugging.

"I was moving it around in my hand and did that without realizing it and the book stopped trying to get out of my hands." It was plausible, even possible really, but for some reason, she wasn't sure. "Anyway, I think we should go and get our things before most students show up tomorrow so we don't have to fight the crowds. What do you think?" Hermione nodded her agreement and the two went and purchased their things for the coming year.

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The next morning, Harry and Hermione were sitting at a table in the Leaky Cauldron talking about their upcoming classes when a set of red-headed twins showed up through the floo system. Harry smiled as he saw them orient themselves and step away from the fireplace for the next Weasley to come through.

"Oi! Diabolic Duo! Over here," Harry waved them over as both grinned fiendishly at their new nickname. They walked over side-by-side as Ginny came through the flames.

"Well, if it isn't Mister Potter and-"

"Miss Granger sitting at breakfast together like-"

"A blissfully-"

"Wedded-"

"Couple!" Harry and Hermione blushed, though Harry decided to have a little fun with them. He scooted over to Hermione and wrapped an arm around her, not paying attention to Mrs Weasley coming through the flames.

"Why, dear gents, I'll have you know I have to wait until this radiant creature beside me is at least fifteen before I get to propose!" Hermione blushed a fierce red and squeaked indignantly as the twins broke out into loud guffaws. Mrs Weasley who had been just within hearing range went apoplectic.

"YOU WHAT!" Like an angry mother hen, she squared her shoulders and began stalking towards the group at the table. Harry decided to head her off before she got worked up over nothing. Well, nothing yet if he had anything to say about it.

"Missus Weasley, calm down. I-"

"CALM DOWN! YOU-"

"SHUT UP!" He quickly yelled, getting the shocked reaction he had hoped for and quickly began explaining in the surprised silence that followed. "There's no bloody need to start yelling. As I was saying, you should calm down because I was only playing along with what the Diabolic Duo was saying to make Hermione and I blush. I am not waiting for Hermione to turn fifteen to ask her to marry me." He realized his arm was still around Hermione, so he quickly pulled away and put both arms on the table. "Hermione and I aren't currently together, so don't get worked up before hearing the situation or you risk making yourself look like a fool." Everyone around them was holding as still as possible as he finished, not wanting to become the new focus of Mother Weasley's ire. The twins, Hermione, Molly and Ginny who had overheard everything except Percy who was only now coming through the floo system were still shocked he had told Mrs Weasley to 'shut up'. Though, Hermione would recognize several minutes later that he had used the term 'currently', which was a very important qualifier.

"Ah, yes well," Molly turned red as she realized she had just been spoken down to by a thirteen year old. Harry, recognizing she was floundering about, gave her an easy out.

"No worries, Missus Weasley. I know you were just looking out for Hermione." Molly accepted the out as her husband, Arthur, came through the fire following Ron who came up to the table and plopped down, not noticing the silent twins and quieter-than-usual Molly.

"What's up, mate? How was your summer?" Ron, not noticing the tense atmosphere or awkward silence, pilfered a piece of bacon from Harry's plate and toast from Hermione's, not caring that they were cold and several hours old as Molly took charge once again and got everyone together to fetch their supplies.

"Good, Ron," Harry said. "Hermione and I got our letters early yesterday, so we already got our stuff. When you're done getting everything, head back here and we can catch up, alright?" Ron nodded as he swallowed the last bit of toast and followed his mother.

"You're going to tell him you changed classes?" Hermione asked, making Harry nod.

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Not but after roughly an hour of waiting, Ron and his family showed back up in the Leaky Cauldron. The redhead in question made his way over to their table where Harry and Hermione were still talking, this time about transfiguring living materials to living animals versus non-living materials. While Harry was seeing things in a new perspective that even thirteen-year old Hermione saw, Hermione was exhilarated to be having a real conversation with one of her best friends on an advanced level.

As Ron sat down, Tom the barman brought each of them a hearty beef stew and butterbeers. "What's up guys? How'd your summers go?" Ron asked as he tucked into his food. Harry took a sip of his butterbeer before beginning.

"Well, the day after we got back, I got emancipated and left the Dursleys'," Harry began, causing Ron to choke on a carrot before swallowing it down.

"You what!" He gasped, making Harry laugh.

"Yea, they were as happy to see me go as I was to leave!" He took another sip of his drink before setting it down. "Anyway, I took up the mantle as Head of the House of Potter, so I got access to my inheritance and was able to live in one of my parents' houses and I've been there since." He shrugged, trying to make it off as unimportant, knowing how Ron's jealous streak came through at some of the weirdest times.

"I got a potion to help with the malnourishment from living with them and had been working out almost daily since I moved out and came here for the last week of break." He noticed Hermione eye him in confusion because of all of the information he was leaving out. He gave her a look she understood to mean he would explain later before continuing on again.

"Anyway. The big thing I wanted to tell you about is that I've changed my classes from Divination to Ancient Runes and Arithmancy." Ron's mind boggled at all of the information he just got.



He understood that Harry was now legally an adult and could deal with that. It wasn't much different from how things were originally. Harry moving out was a huge change, though. That would mean he wouldn't want to come over as much as he used to. Before, he would always be willing to go to the Burrow for the whole summer, and now he probably wouldn't.

"I thought we were going to take Divination together? Why are you taking those classes?" He turned to Hermione and glared at her for taking his best mate from their shared classes. "Did you put him up to this?" Hermione's jaw dropped as he accused her and her eyes narrowed, but just before she could begin her side of the argument into what was bound to become a loud row that Harry did not want the other Weasleys eating at another table to hear, Harry interrupted them.

"Ron, I chose this," he said forcefully. "Think about it. Each year, I've been forced to fight Voldemort in some way," he ignored Ron's shuddering. Really, they had faced the blighter twice already in this time line! "In first year, after only two months, we fought a mountain troll. Last year, I had to fight and kill a bloody basilisk! Not to mention that we both had to stare down those acromantula," he said with a grimace.

"What acromantula?" Hermione asked, making Harry wince. He knew that tone. He was in trouble.

"Er, we'll explain later," he hedged. "Anyway," he looked nervously at the fuming Hermione before back to Ron who seemed to understand where Harry was heading, "in all of these situations where we just barely lived, or where Hermione's knowledge has saved our lives, we could have had much better odds of survival if we had only paid better attention in class and took things seriously like Hermione has always tried to tell us to do," Harry said, noticing Hermione's attempt to hide her smug smile. She felt so vindicated that he finally understood. "Divination won't help me if I have to fight against any of these things again. I don't have the Sight or the gift or whatever you want to call it, so I figure I may as well take something that may help me in the future."

"Each year so far, I've had to face the bastard-"

"Harry! Language!" Hermione chastised.

"Sorry Hermione," he said barely thinking about it. "But if I have to face him again this year, or something else weird or dangerous, I'd rather be better prepared. I would have told you sooner, but until two weeks ago, you were in Egypt, and I didn't want to try and make Hedwig fly that kind of distance. I'm not even sure if it would have been safe to try." Harry wasn't sure if she was still in the rafters or not, but he didn't want to risk saying he doubted her ability only for her to get defensive later. She was an oddly proud bird.

"It's alright. I understand," Ron mumbled before taking another bite of his stew.

"If you want, you can still switch classes. You have until two weeks after school starting before your choices are set." Ron grimaced. The whole idea of Divination to begin with was less work.

"That's okay, mate. You go ahead. I don't think those classes are for me." Harry smiled and clapped Ron on the back before digging into his own stew. Meanwhile, Hermione was rather pleased with the choices made so far.

Harry was beginning to show far more maturity and a caring insight towards her feelings that she had been longing for for two years. Well, far longer in all honesty, but only two years with any magical friends. It was the type of realization that she could honestly and safely say, with all certainty, that Harry valued her and her friendship. He was still just as nice as ever, nicer even, and he was not using her for help with homework. For two weeks, he had been asking her opinions and actually paying attention to what she had to say. While he paid attention in the past, he always had a sense of attempting to trying to not be obvious that he wasn't following her.

Hermione was really liking the changes in Harry.

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[Author's Note:] - Please look back at the "About" chapter if you have any questions regarding prices or how much a galleon is worth. Especially those who complained that I was ignoring Canon pricing, when I'd already stated in chapter one that I was doing so.

The story shall now pick up in speed! WEWTIES! (Update: That means plot, not update speed.)

Bashing: I am aware I made Dumbledore poo himself twice within an hour. This is not going to be a common occurrence. In fact, I don't plan to needlessly bash (much) anyone aside from maybe a little Ron/Ginny/Dumbledore/Draco/etc, but not much – Moderation, really. It will actually be mostly done through character interactions. In Dumbledore's case, most things like this will be based on his age and mental facilities (or lack thereof.) I won't say exactly if he will be good or bad or what, because it will be more fun this way, but don't expect me to go about bashing anyone horribly.

## Chapter5 – We Meet Again, Arch Nemesis!

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Rating: M

Warnings: Adult Language

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

I have started a purely H/Hr/L fic (and Neville/Susan Bones) called "Darkened Paths". It is going to have a much higher focus on the relationship and lemons than this, along with a more proactive and relentless Harry in regards to his enemies and intelligent Death Eaters and truly cunning Voldemort, but I hope to make it as enjoyable as this. Details can be found in the first chapter and on my forum (which is also where added details will be and you can discuss the plot and such with other readers and myself) like all of my fics. Harry will be MUCH harder on his enemies in that fic, and have no mercy for them or anyone who stands in his or his girls' ways to completing their goals. Time-manipulation for training, independent!Harry, Gray!Harry, agenda-driven!goblins, sleeper agents, double agents, goblin warrior training, etc.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Thoughts of Pudding" by Brian64 (H/Hr/L ship)

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"If you want, you can still switch classes. You have until two weeks after school starting before your choices are set." Ron grimaced. The whole idea of Divination to begin with was less work.

"That's okay, mate. You go ahead. I don't think those classes are for me." Harry smiled and clapped Ron on the back before digging into his own stew. Meanwhile, Hermione was rather pleased with the choices made so far.

Harry was beginning to show far more maturity and a caring insight towards her feelings that she had been longing for for two years. Well, far longer in all honesty, but only two years with any magical friends. It was the type of realization that she could honestly and safely say, with all certainty, that Harry valued her and her friendship. He was still just as nice as ever, nicer even, and he was not using her for help with homework. For two weeks, he had been asking her opinions and actually paying attention to what she had to say. While he paid attention in the past, he always had a sense of attempting to trying to not be obvious that he wasn't following her.

Hermione was really liking the changes in Harry.

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Harry quickly made his escape from the Leaky Cauldron, Ron and Hermione a little after one and made his way to John's trunk shop while many families were either finishing their shopping and going home for lunch or were yet to arrive and the crowds were thinner. As he entered, the bell jingled and John looked up from a parchment he was writing on and he smiled brightly.

"Ah! Mister Potter! Excellent to see you!" John practically bounced on the balls of his feet with each step he took as he ushered Harry towards the back room where he saw two trunks that were made of deep cherry wood and expertly carved, one a little softer than the other in its details, offering artistic carvings that seems to flow and sooth rather than the harder lines and sudden turns on the lines of the other.

"I take it you finished, then?" Harry asked as John walked up to the two trunks and presented them proudly.

"You bet, Mister Potter! I even got the doorways finished so both trunks are tied together," the ancient man said happily. "You now have an extra door in the kitchen area that leads to each trunk and can be locked, just in case you want to keep from going back and forth." Harry nodded happily as John finished.

"What about doorways with selective users?" Harry asked curiously, causing John to grimace.

"I was able to get the charms to work, but not where people or extra doors can be added later," he said somberly. "I based the work off of my security charms with the blood magic since you seemed focused on working with that girl who lives in a muggle neighborhood, which means she probably has at least one muggle parent?" Harry nodded to confirm the man's suspicions.

"Yes. This is in part for muggles. The over all goal is so she can keep her books hidden and maintain the Statute of Secrecy, while still able to allow them to come to my home whenever they want or need to and not anyone else who doesn't know about our world or who I don't want to have access to my home who may show up. I'm sorry I didn't think to mention that before." John waved off his concern with a smile.

"Don' worry about it. I thought about it, so it won't make me start over or nothin'. I'm jus' having trouble figuring out how I'm going to make it so that new doorways can be added to one that already exists without having to be physically next to one 'er putting the security charms you want at risk." Harry thought for a moment, hoping he could help his new business partner out when an idea came to mind.

"What about setting it up kind of like the floo network?" He asked. John shook his head negatively.

"Wouldn't work properly. My security charms work by sayin' that the person who donated blood can work that particular system of doorways. If I set it up like the floo, then the security systems would be pointless since they could just say where they want to go." Harry nodded sadly before a new idea popped into his head.

"Well, what if you set each individual system as a single floo system accessible only to themselves instead of all doorways open to each other? That would keep them set up properly and still allow everyone to go to the correct place if they return home with mine, even if I'm connected to a bunch of different homes at once." John nodded thoughtfully.

"It could work. I'm not rightly sure," he said. "I'd need to set a keystone somewhere so new users can be added ... I'll work on it and see what I can find." Harry nodded before making a decision.

"Well, if you can figure out everything except for the security system aspects, I'm still willing to buy the idea from you instead of going into a partnership for," he pretended to think for a moment, "maybe two million galleons." Harry barely held in the smile as he saw John's eyes go from worried when he mentioned not going into a partnership to extremely surprised and a huge smile blossomed on his creased face. "I'd be willing to purchase this at any time from now to whenever unless you go public with the idea. I don't want certain people to learn of this quite yet." John worked his mouth silently for several moments before nodding shakily and motioning towards Harry's new trunks.

"I would like to try and work on them a little longer, but I will wait to go public until we've spoken about everything. But for now, let me tell you how to add people to your security systems here and how they work." Harry watched and listened with the kind of intensity Hermione was notorious for during her lessons before heading off to Quality Quidditch Supplies for Ron's Christmas gift.

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John sat back in his silent shop and pondered his most recent customer; Harry Potter. Now that he had explained the security systems and given him a pamphlet with all the directions on it, he was alone in his shop. To be honest, he loved his business, his wife and his three children, even if they were adults now and out of his house with families of their own. God willing, he still had a good fifty years to live as long as he took care of himself and didn't get on the bad side of any of the wrong type. The wrong type like the kind the Potter boy seemed to be worried about, if his preparations to protect that muggleborn witch and her family were any indication, which did not bode well for the general populace if it meant anything.

John was not a fool. He dealt with enough shady clients wanting hidden compartments and the like to know when someone was planning ahead and when they were worried something would be approaching that they didn't want to be found out.

Like most shop owners in the Alley, he made a respectable living, but not what one may consider wealthy. He just did not get the kind of business needed to support his family and have much at the end of the year for frivolities. If it weren't for the added fees he could charge for hidden compartments, he wouldn't even have that much considering how long his trunks lasted for. John was able to provide a proper education for his girls and keep his wife happy, but not much else.

What the Potter boy was offering was not only two million galleons, or roughly two hundred million pounds for when he ventured out into the muggle world with his wife, but security and peace of mind in his and his wife's remaining years, and something to let him help his children in their lives as well. He would be lucky if the Ministry allowed him to keep enough control over the doorways to make even a quarter of that by the time his life was over, leaving nothing to his children beyond what he would have managed to amass by then that he could leave in his will. That was also assuming the Ministry did not just shove a bottle of Veritaserum down his throat, get their answers and then obliviate him of all knowledge and claim it for their own. John was not a man who believed the Ministry was as infallible as they tried to make everyone believe. He had seen that happen in the past, after all. His best friend had created the Remembrall and had been obliviated so thoroughly he thought he was six.

No. He would have to try and get the security system working on his own and try to get more out of the deal with the Potter boy and let him deal with the Ministry's minions and such. John could tell the kid wanted it for more than what he was saying. He would have jumped at the chance to sell everything for far less than what he was being offered and the boy had to have known that. Even then, he seemed to want far too much security on the doors and the two trunks themselves. Known death eaters had not even asked for as much in the past. In fact, he could not think of anyone aside from an old, grizzled and paranoid ex-auror who had ever asked for such things.

The bell on his door jingled, signaling the rush of customers now that the lunch hour was over, so he put off his thoughts until later when he could really work on the spellwork necessary.

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"We can not do it, Dumbledore!" Cornelius Fudge ranted as he paced back and forth in his office. He wanted to help Dumbledore reverse the Potter boy's emancipation, he really did. But it had somehow made it through all of the proper channels without being noticed by any of his people and now everything was done, magically and legally binding. But did that stop the Supreme Mugwump from showing up once each week to try and convince him to do it anyway? Hell no!

"Cornelius, please. I can not stress enough how important it is that-" Apparently not.

"I can't, Dumbledore," Fudge growled. "The paperwork is legal and was signed by the boy's guardians. Guardians which you selected for him, I might add, if the paperwork is proper." Dumbledore winced slightly as Fudge's comment struck home. Dumbledore did not like his plans going wrong.

"Yes. I have since learned that they may not have been the best of guardians during these summer months. However, I have been his magical guardian since his arrival in the wizarding world and I was not consulted and did not sign anything to allow this." Dumbledore could not lose this chance to get Harry back where he belonged. While he could not erect the blood wards in place again, they were still his family and he could still erect some very powerful wards in place that would be more than adequate.

"It doesn't matter, Dumbledore. The only thing you can do to negate his emancipation is to prove he is unfit to hold himself accountable as an adult. You know these things," Fudge sneered. "I don't know why you are pressing the matter when you know I have less power than you do and can't do anything about it." Dumbledore sighed as Fudge finished. No, it would not have exactly been legal, but Harry could not be allowed to roam around unsupervised. It looked as though he would be forced to go to the Wizengamot. The same Wizengamot that Harry was now a part of and would be alerted to their assembly and why they were being called together. It was merely a stroke of luck that Harry did not know anyone that Dumbledore did not know better and could coerce into his side of the argument if Harry was aware of his ability to call in someone to hold his chair.

"Very well, Cornelius. I will simply go to the Wizengamot to have his emancipation overturned. I am afraid I had hoped to have your support in this matter as I have helped you repeatedly in the past," Dumbledore spoke sadly, conveying a sense of hurt and disappointment. Fudge saw this as a loss of a potential, and strong, supporter of his office in matters that may come up in the future and immediately turned to sympathetic counsel.

"I do support you, Albus. I really do. But what you are asking for is beyond my ability," Fudge whined. "If the boy goes to the papers and says that we overturned his emancipation, especially as the head of an ancient pureblood line, it would be the end of my career and it would most likely need to be retracted and his emancipation given to him all over again to keep the people from anarchy!" Fudge dropped into his chair heavily, ignoring its creaks of protest.

"When you first told me about this a few weeks ago, I thought he had done something wrong with his paperwork or he was being a menace somewhere and I just hadn't heard about it. But he has done nothing wrong and every avenue I have tried to unearth comes to a dead end. I am sorry but, until he does something illegal or proves himself unable to take care of himself, there is nothing we can do. He's got more than adequate funds to take care of himself, so I'm not sure what you'll be able to do."

Disheartened, Dumbledore bid the Minister of Magic a good day and left to his office at Hogwarts where he would try to make new plans. Harry could not be allowed to run amok on his own without guidance. He was far too important to the inevitable war to come.

When Albus stepped through the floo to his office, he sent an immediate missive to Severus Snape. He needed a deft touch with his plans. Something Severus' Slytherin cunning has helped with immensely in the past and he only had that day to plan before the students showed up the following evening. After that, with his headmaster's duties, he would be hard-pressed to fix things.

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Harry reentered the Leaky Cauldron with a happy smirk on his face, and the pockets on either side of his pants filled with the shrunken trunks he had just obtained from John and a Nimbus 2000 for Ron. He found himself incredibly pleased with himself after getting the

Christmas gifts for Hermione and Ron. It was something that he had been noticing in the past couple of weeks as he spent time with Hermione and her parents.

The day he had gone to visit Hermione for the first time after the summer break had started, he had thought his excitement and nerves about meeting her had been because he was hoping to keep his knowledge a secret and because he had plans to, for lack of a better way of phrasing it in his mind that did not seem like he should end up in a psychiatric ward, woo her. He had wanted to get her thinking about him romantically, or try to, and thought he had done a brilliant job of it.

But each time something he was not used to came up, such as the elder Grangers showing up for dinner or times when he made sure to try and flirt with Hermione, he found himself reacting in ways that he would not have expected, or feel sensations like he would not have expected. Just like now.

Harry was getting his friends their Christmas presents, and felt like it was Christmas Eve instead of being four months away. And he had noticed similar situations coming up when Hermione's father would lightly tease him, or when he got flustered. He just did not handle them as well as he had handled similar situations when he was older before coming back in time. He was handling them as he had when he was this age the first go around, and it bothered him that he could not predict his own reactions.

By the time he got to the table where Ron and Hermione were sitting, his thoughts were pushed aside to be contemplated later and he sat down between the two of them after calling Tom to make up a bacon sandwich. His appetite from the potions had not fully left him yet, so he was constantly eating, still.

"So, Hermione. Are you wanting to take a look at familiars today?" He asked.

"Yes," Hermione said, beaming. "My parents let me look yesterday, but wanted me to wait until today to get whatever I decide so I don't have to leave it cooped up in my room the whole day until we leave tomorrow. They should be showing up in a little while after they've had lunch at this Italian bistro they found a few months ago." Hermione had finally been able to figure out what had made her

father so happy the past couple of weeks, being more than intelligent enough to realize he was always happiest right after he and her mother had some 'alone time' together. While the initial reaction had been to take a long bath in nearly scalding water, she realized quickly enough that it was a natural thing for a married couple to do. She did not have to think about it too much, however, leaving her parents' plenty of time alone. Besides, she had been having a fun summer with Harry, so it worked out for everyone.

"You're getting a familiar, Hermione?" Ron asked, eying Harry's newly-arrived sandwich with a greedy eye, especially since Harry saved a few strips of bacon, wrapped them in a napkin and put them in his pocket. He had just floo'd back from the Burrow where he had eaten with the rest of his family, but there was always room for more.

"Yes, I am. I'm planning on getting a cat!" Hermione nearly hopped in her seat in enthusiasm. She had strongly been thinking about getting an owl so she could communicate with her two best friends more often or getting the cat, but Harry had suggested the cat and explained his reasons in glowing terms, just about making the decision for her after she read his letter. Ron, however, saw a fatal flaw in her plan, quite literally, in fact.

"Hermione!" He exclaimed, looking as shocked as he sounded. "Cats eat rats!" Whether it was with conscious thought or not, he placed his hand over his pocket protectively, covering Scabbers. "What if it goes after Scabbers?"

"Oh, honestly!" Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry snickered through a mouthful of sandwich. Had he not been in the middle of a bite, he would have laughed outright, but did not think that she would appreciate the food everywhere. She never did with Ron, at any rate. "Familiars tend to be more intelligent than the average animal, Ronald. I'm sure cats would be perfectly safe around Scabbers."

Ron looked to Harry for help, but when he saw Harry's red and smiling face, he knew he would not get it. "A cat is a cat, Hermione," he grumbled. He would have to keep an eye out for any bloodthirsty felines. "Scabbers hasn't been looking too good anyway, so I'll go with you guys and we can make sure to get one that won't eat him."

While he struggled to maintain only a slightly amused appearance, Harry was laughing maniacally in his mind, knowing that Hermione

was going to get a cat that would take any opportunity to get a good bite into Scabbers. He would probably have to set up a few cases where it may very well happen. Making sure not to get caught, of course. "Well, it's nearly half past one now, so Dan and Emma should be here soon."

"Actually," Ron said, pointing towards the entrance to the Cauldron, "they're already here." The group looked and saw Hermione's parents looking around for their daughter before their eyes alighted on them and they came over quickly, enveloping Hermione in a quick hug each. Hermione was a little annoyed that her father still had that bloody grin on his face.

'Honestly! Don't those two ever get enough!'

"Did you two have a good lunch?" She asked, ignoring the glance they threw at one another before nodding.

"We did," Emma said. "Now, are you done eating? We can go to that animal spot if you've already decided what you want."

"I already knew what I was getting," Hermione said as she got up, the two boys following suit, "but you wouldn't let me get one yesterday." She mock-glared at her parents, both of which smiled amusedly.

"It wouldn't be very nice to keep it cooped up in your room now, would it?" Her father asked as he mussed up Harry's hair with a wink when the boy got within arm's reach. He had originally done it the first time after Harry caught on to one of his jokes and then played along, thus flustering his wife. When Dan saw how happy it made him, he found excuses to do it a little more often and eventually, the new habit became a way of greeting for them. And if Harry cared for Hermione as much as he seemed to, then it would be good to have a close relationship with the boy so the threats of bodily harm for hurting her would come across that much stronger, after all.

Oh how Dan awaited the day he could put the fear of puberty into Harry Potter!

"No, I suppose it wouldn't," Hermione sighed. The wait had been maddening up to this point, and now it was even worse. The

knowing that they were only moments away and the slower they moved, the longer it would be.

"Do you mind if we follow?" Harry asked. "I'd like to pick up some things for Hedwig."

"Yeah, and Scabbers is looking worse today than he has for the last week. I wanna have the clerk take a look at 'im," Ron said, hefting the squeaking rat up and not seeing Emma blanch; she hated rats with a fiery passion; rats peed on everything! Harry could not be sure, but the rat seemed to have a lot of bald spots that either had not been there the last time around or he had not noticed. But then, he did not have any interest in the rat the last time around until he found out it was Peter Pettigrew, either.

"Not a problem, boys. It's a public place, after all." Dan ushered the two after Emma and Hermione through Diagon Alley, unconsciously keeping his hand on Harry's shoulder as the green-eyed boy pointed out various things of interest.

Minutes later, Hermione's grin threatened to scare a little child as she entered the shop full of familiars and her eyes began to dart about gleefully for the perfect one. "Excuse me, Ma'am, but where are your cat familiars?" She asked the middle-aged woman behind the counter who had a strange, green canary on her shoulder that was about the size of a kiwi. Hermione looked closely and saw that it actually was a kiwi. Very cute, but rather odd.

"Off in the far wall, over there," the woman at the counter said, pointing them off to the wall on the right side from the door. Hermione took off like a shot while her parents smiled in good nature. Seeing their only daughter act like the child that she was had been something they had been missing for a long time now. Seeing her so enthusiastic for something as simple as a cat filled them with a sense of contentment that was different from the way they felt when she showed her incredible intelligence and strong sense of independence. That sense of independence and intelligence had been as bad for her as it had been good, but in the end, it kept her as a strong, young woman who eventually found two great friends. Dan would have preferred they were not boys, but compromises had to be made.

Ron, not too keen on the idea of a cat coming into the picture, went up to the counter and ignored Hermione's cooing over the fluffy buggers. "Hi. This is Scabbers and he hasn't been looking too good for the last week. Can you look at him for me?"

"Set him up on the counter and we'll see what we can do," the woman said, eying the unkempt rat with well-hidden disdain. The thing looked like it was just pulled from a trash bin. Smelled like it, too. "Hold him still."

"Here you go," Ron offered Scabbers to the woman by holding him in place on the counter since the rat was trying to run off. The woman behind the counter began running diagnostic spells with a frown while Hermione frowned at the cats she was looking at as Harry came over to her.

"See anything that calls to you?" He asked, watching a few kittens tussle with each other, batting at each others' ears and tails. They were cute little buggers.

"Call out to me?" Hermione asked, looking at Harry inquisitively as he nodded.

"Yea. I felt an immediate pull when I saw Hedwig for the first time. I don't know if it was because Hagrid had already bought her for me or if we were meant to be together, but I definitely felt something." He motioned towards the cats that were looking at the two who invaded their sanctuary with curiosity, but only the kittens seemed to pay them any real interest. There were loose strings on their sleeves!

"No," Hermione said, shaking her head, "nothing like that."

"That's good," Harry mumbled to himself without realizing it.

"What?" Hermione looked at Harry carefully as his eyes widened slightly. While it was difficult to know what he said for sure, she had heard it well enough to wonder what he was on about.

"None of these seem to care one way or another," he batted the kitten that was pawing at his pocket with the bacon away gently. "I just didn't think any of them were the right ones." He shrugged as a

way to try and make the situation seem less tense, though it did not seem to work.

"Crookshanks, no!" The loud voice of the woman at the counter who had just tried some diagnostics a third time caused both Harry and Hermione to look towards Ron who squealed in a high-pitched voice and spun away from a messy ball of orange fur that had just launched itself at Scabbers who was now safely clutched in Ron's hands.

"Crookshanks, that's the last straw!" The woman behind the counter picked up the spitting feline and put it into a nearby carrier, locking it up as Harry and Hermione came up to Ron.

"What happened, Ron?" Harry asked as he winked at the cat that simply tilted its head to the side in response.

"That bloody cat just tried to eat Scabbers! That's what!" Ron yelled as he glared at the cat. Harry took a quick glance at Hermione who was looking at the cat speculatively.

"Sorry about that," the clerk apologized. "Crookshanks has been here for a few years because no one wants him. He's always been a menace, but the owner can't find it in her kind heart to be rid of the beast." Dan and Emma, who had been keeping off to the side so that Hermione could roam about freely spoke up for the first time.

"If the cat is a menace, why not just keep him locked up?" Emma asked.

"Cats are too large to keep in their carriers for more than a few hours or they get sick," the clerk shrugged as if she did not really care at that point. The cat had been on her bad side since day one. "Anyway," she said, changing the subject as she turned to Ron, "your rat isn't sick, just very old. All of my scans came up with odd results aside from that, so I'm not sure about much else. For some reason, I kept getting inconclusive readings."

Ron nodded sadly. "Yea, he's been a family pet for twelve years now, actually."

"Oh," the clerk said, looking surprised. "That's a rather long time. But, we do have some energetic black mice over here." The clerk



motioned towards a few cages that held speedy little mice that were covered in sleek, black fur and playing about.

"Nah, they're just show-offs. Scabbers is fine, so I'd rather keep him anyway." Ron gave a last glare at the caged and hissing Crookshanks before turning to Harry. "I'm waiting outside to keep Scabbers away from that killer. You wanna come?"

"You think Scabbers really needs the counseling, then?" Harry asked with a grin. "Yea, I'll wait. I can see what Hermione gets when she leaves. That okay?" He asked, turning to Hermione who looked away from Crookshanks for the first time.

"Yes. I should only be a few more minutes." Hermione watched the two boys leave before turning back to the cat carrier and taking a good look at the cat who was now staring right back at her. He was just a bit larger than the average cat and just as furry. His legs were a bit longer than looked proper for his body and were really quite bowed out and the cat had the flattest face she had ever seen on a cat. Even its nose appeared to have been squished. It was easy to see why Crookshanks had not been purchased for so long.

It was easily the cutest thing she had ever seen.

Outside, Ron was looking Scabbers over with a critical eye. "I'm telling you, Harry, that creature should be put down for the good of all rats."

Harry laughed good-naturedly to get Ron's attention before jerking his thumb at the store. "I dunno, Ron. I liked him." Harry's amusement was obvious in his voice, but the flustered redhead had apparently not noticed it because of the words themselves.

"You wouldn't!" He asked with an expression of absolute horror over his face.

"Your birthday is coming up, after all. I could always get you a new rat and then get the cat," he said teasingly. Ron just scowled.

"Prat," he said, causing Harry to laugh. It probably would not have been as funny if Harry did not hold a grudge against the animagus.

"Well, yes. Yes I am," Harry said, still amused. Moments later of a comfortable, though boring, silence, the door opened and Hermione walked out carrying the very same ragged-looking fluff ball from earlier. A fact Ron was quick to catch.

"Hermione! You bought that killer!" He asked furiously.

"Yes, isn't he just so cute?" She cooed into the cat's fur as she hugged him, causing the cat to purr as he kept a curious eye on Harry.

"He's a killer! He tried to eat Scabbers!" Ron yelled.

"Oh, honestly Ronald! He's just misunderstood. The lady said he's been here for ages and no one has offered to buy him, so she gave him to me for a very good price." She said, sounding exasperated.

Harry walked up to the cat and held out his hand, close enough for the cat to sniff him and get his scent. Crookshanks slowly and hesitantly moved his head forward, somewhat leery of the human and sniffed closely for a few seconds before rubbing his nose against Harry's fingers, showing his acceptance. It may have also been partly because he smelled his new master on the boy's hands, but that just meant she was willing to let him touch her.

"Misunderstood!" Ron screeched as he neared Hermione. "What's to misunderstand? He tried to kill Scabbers!" Crookshanks reached out and swiped at Ron's arm, giving him three long, red scratches as he flattened his ears and hissed at the human who would dare yell at his master. It was oddly effective, even though he was inside the little cage. Ron glared between Hermione and Crookshanks before shaking his head and turning away. "I'm going back to the Burrow. I need to get Scabbers away from that ugly murderer. See you guys in the morning." And with that, he stomped away as Hermione huffed.

"Crookshanks is not ugly, Ronald!" She yelled back after him, feeling he got what he deserved for being so nasty to her new familiar. Crookshanks hissed at the departing redhead, giving his own kitty last words in. Harry pulled out one of the two strips of bacon he saved from his sandwich and offered it to the suddenly affable cat. The boy may have smelled of something ancient, but the bacon was fresh.

"Well, I think you made an excellent choice," he said. "But why aren't your parents out yet?"

"Well, the lady actually gave Crookshanks to me for a knut," she said with a light blush as she opened the carrier to hold the feline. "My parents are getting him food, a bed and the like." As she finished, Crookshanks held onto the bacon in his mouth and hopped into Harry's arms, purring, and continued to chew on the heart-clogging goodness.

"Wow," Dan said as he and Emma left the store with two small bags each. "I can't believe she gave us such a good deal on all of the supplies!"

"Well, she was in a really good mood," Emma said with a smile. She hoped the cat knew better than to risk using the bathroom on any of the furniture, but hoped that he would grow out of that before Hermione showed up later while at Hogwarts.

"Crookshanks is not a bad cat," Hermione said sounding annoyed, causing the three with her to laugh. "Though he did seem to choose Harry over me." She eyed her new familiar with a frown as he looked at her innocently and mewed.

"That's 'cause I fed him first," Harry said with an impish grin. "I've got a second piece of bacon in my pocket when he's done with this one that you can feed him. He'll love you instead all over again." Almost immediately, Crookshanks finished the half-chewed piece and hopped to Hermione who yelped and barely caught him.

Surprisingly agile for a fluff ball.

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The next morning found Harry, Hermione and the whole Weasley brood scrambling to get onto the train with only a few minutes to spare before it took off for the school. Harry had tried to get everyone to get ready and leave earlier than they had, but had always been rebuked with 'we have plenty of time' over and over again. Now, they were barely getting onto the train with only a few minutes to spare, and even that was because they finally got fed up with his pressing. How the hell had they made it the first time?

"Here's one," Hermione said, showing them a compartment with only one man inside who was currently sleeping. "Everywhere else was full." They quietly stowed away their trunks

"Who do you suppose he is," Ron asked.

"R.J. Lupin. He's probably the new Defense teacher," Hermione said confidently. Wide-eyed, Ron turned to Harry.

"It's scary how she always knows everything, Mate!" He spluttered. Harry laughed as Hermione rolled her eyes.

"It's on his briefcase," Harry said, pointing at the offending item. He was so amused, he did not think to let Hermione answer as she had in the time-line he remembered. Hermione simply raised an eyebrow at Harry as she took a seat next to Ron across from the new teacher as Harry sat next to him. While the old Harry was not likely to catch details like that, she was pleased to note this one did. Harry wanted desperately to wake the man up and begin chatting like crazy, but knew why he was so tired. He decided to let Remus Lupin rest and pulled out the book Lora gave him to read from.

"Uh, Harry?" Ron asked, sounding a little unsure. Harry looked up at him confusedly and saw the redhead shift in his seat. There was an odd feeling of *déjà vu* from the train ride home.

"Yes, Ron?"

"What're you reading for? We haven't got to Hogwarts yet. Wanna play some Exploding Snap instead?" He asked. Hermione rolled her eyes and spoke quietly before Harry could reply.

"Honestly Ronald! You can not play a game with loud explosions three feet from a man who is probably our new DADA teacher, meaning he is probably very good with his wand," she stressed, "and is currently asleep and would wake up possibly hexing first and asking questions later." When she saw Ron had paled sufficiently, she nodded resolutely and settled back to read her own book.

"Er, right." He looked at the man next to Harry who's face was currently hidden under a hat. "So, what are you reading there, mate?" Harry eyed Ron for a second before hefting the book.

"I'm just reading up about ancient runes. It's one of the subjects I don't really have a basic understanding of and I've been using the past couple of weeks to read up on it so I could try to memorize the symbols and definitions and the like. This book is very detailed and explains them really well." Harry answered. Ron grimaced and held up his hands in a surrendering fashion.

"I am definitely happy I didn't take that class," Ron deadpanned, not at all pleased with the thick book, or the idea of reading it. Harry chuckled quietly while Hermione rolled her eyes and followed Harry's example with her own books, though hers were the school texts instead of the more complete and thorough writings Harry had. But then, he did not have the specific information that would be related to his classes in the book he was reading as she did.

An hour and a half later, Harry was engrossed in his book having become used to the interesting subject when he first started and only just barely registered the compartment door opening. He looked up from his book and repressed the evil smirk that threatened to spread across his face. He had been waiting a month for this event and had been practicing like a man possessed to make it just right.

"Hello Potter!" Draco Malfoy smiled imperiously down at his arch nemesis, flanked by his cronies, Crabbe and Goyle. "Still traveling with the mudblood and Weasel, I see?"

"You aren't really very bright, are you?" Hermione asked with a smirk and pointing at the still-sleeping Lupin next to Harry. "You would do well not to start something in the presence of the new professor." Draco paled as he saw the older male next to Harry who was still thankfully asleep. Harry, knowing Draco was about to leave quickly cast a wandless glamor charm over his eyes to make them glow a very bright green from his irises and to numb his muscles of his throat and jaw enough to be sure he would not smile and so it would slightly alter his voice and make it sound deeper. He looked up and directly at Draco, who noticed almost immediately and took a quick step back as his face contorted to one of fear and confusion.

"Wh-what the hell?" Draco asked to no one in particular. Curious, Ron and Hermione looked to where Draco was and saw Harry's eyes glowing, even from the sides as the glow grew in intensity. Then Harry spoke.

"Beware, Serpent Prince, Fool of the Den. The tiny warriors approach and demand your respect. Take heed of this warning or lose yourself to their relentless assault. Do not anger the tiny ones or you will perish."

Terrified, Draco quickly spun around and left, slamming the door shut. Harry canceled the charms and smiled to himself as he sat back in his seat, noticing Hermione and Ron both staring at him. Ron looked like he was about to follow Draco's lead and Hermione looked worried.

'Whoops. I forgot to let them know about this. And Hermione could have probably helped me with something better to say, too.' Harry thought sheepishly. He smiled and scratched the back of his head in a disarming fashion.

"Sorry about that, guys. I forgot to mention I was planning on doing that." He laughed nervously as both of them calmed and Hermione glared at him.

"What exactly did you do? And who are the 'tiny warriors'? What are you planning?" Hermione stared at him until he began to fidget and look everywhere but at her. Hermione realized she was doing the same thing she had done in Diagon Alley the day they met up and got their supplies, so she leaned back and crossed her arms with a huff. She had plenty of time to figure it out if he did not crack first.

"Well, I thought it may be interesting for him to not understand what happened and worry about little creatures that may come out of nowhere and try to attack him if he isn't careful," he said slowly, not sure what kind of trouble he was going to get in to with Hermione. He did not want to tell her that he had every intention of following his father's footsteps now that he had a chance to and, with not knowing if Snape or Dumbledore would be able to get into their heads, he did not want to say anything about his plans. Especially knowing that Ron had absolutely no occlumency training.

"That's bloody brilliant!" Ron exclaimed happily. Hermione thwacked Ron on the back of the head and pointed to the man who was somehow still asleep.

"Ronald! You'll wake him up!" She hissed. "And watch your language!" Harry laughed and settled into his seat, glad that they took his excuse at face value. While it was not exactly a lie, it was not the whole truth, which upset him slightly, but he felt it was for a good cause. He had a name to live up to, after all. And all things considered, this was the best year for the Marauders to make their return, even if it was only in spirit.

Five hours and a pleasant assortment of goodies from the snack trolley later, Harry, Hermione and Ron were reading, though Ron's book was simply a Quidditch magazine, when the train shuddered to a stop. All three looked out the window in confusion, though Harry remembered what was happening almost immediately.

"This can't be right," Hermione said mostly to herself. "We can't have arrived this early." She looked out and saw the sky had darkened with black clouds and rain came down heavily.

"I think someone's coming onto the train," Ron said, seeing large shadows boarding two cars down. Almost immediately, the rain over the windows began to frost and ice over.

Harry had thought long and hard about this particular meeting with the dementors, almost as much as he had thought and planned for his one-sided prank war against Draco. However, what he had not planned on was that he was still used to taking control the moment a dangerous situation had arisen and his instincts were still to eliminate a threat before it got too close, and the past two months of emancipation and control over his life had only reinforced that without his realization. Unbidden, those very same instincts from the past two years of war to Harry's memory came to the forefront of his mind and he reacted before thinking.

"Moony!" He barked out as he grabbed his wand, not paying attention to the man or the two teenagers next to him who nearly jumped out of their skin and look around in wide-eyed shock to the suddenly different Harry. "Dementors," he said, motioning out the window as Lupin pulled out his own wand and nodded.

"How-" Remus began, thinking he was seeing the younger version of his best friend, James Potter, before Harry interrupted him, his voice hard and commanding authority.

"Later, Remus. Patroni on three." Harry took a brief moment to lament his complacency as he raised his wand. His original plan was to mention how he had read up on dementors and practiced the Patronus spell over the summer and make sure the undead creature stayed as far away from him as possible so he could try to keep the year mostly the same until he wanted to change it. Not long after Dumbledore died, he had learned that Dementors were drawn to him because of his scar since they wanted the soul fragment stuck in his head and he still despised the things.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, scooting slightly closer to where Harry was standing. She was getting colder and beginning to feel an overwhelming sense of dread and fear. When he looked at her, she let out a soft gasp as she saw his eyes look at her before turning away to look back at the door. She had known Harry for two years, now, and his eyes always had a gentle presence and calming affect. The eyes that looked at her just now were different some how. They did not scare her, as she knew Harry too well to be scared of him, but she had never before seen those eyes on Harry, and it sent a shiver down her spine. She was not sure what the exact cause was, but it was most certainly something that she would not forget for some time.

"Just stay behind me, Hermione. They won't get close," he said, turning back to her and smiling, his old eyes back and shining at her. "I promise."

Moments later, the door handle began to slowly turn and then the door opened, letting each person within get a clear glimpse at what looked like a skeletal figure that was wrapped in gray paper for skin underneath of torn black robes and a thin haze rising from its skin as it cooled the area around it.

"Expecto Patronum!"

"Expecto Patronum!"

A brilliant silver stag erupted from Harry's wand and rammed its way into the cloaked figure in the doorway, causing it to let out a shrill, bloodcurdling scream before flying down the hall, being chased by Prongs and getting hit with his antlers, only stopping when the patronus corralled others with it. Beside him, Remus Lupin's wand



released a bright silver wolf that left the opposite direction and pushed another dementor towards the others.

Once the stag made it outside behind the dementors with the wolf following and keeping them from escaping into the train again, it radiated a bright light and pulsed once, running off all of the dementors before looking around and disappearing in a dissolving mass of sparkling light motes along with the wolf.

Harry looked behind him and saw both Ron and Hermione were shivering in cold and from the mental affects the dementors had on them. He sat down next to Hermione and pulled out two pieces of chocolate from his pocket he had for this purpose and gave them to his friends. "Eat this, it will help you feel better."

Both began to eat it immediately, trusting him in what he said without hesitation. Hermione leaned into Harry's chest as he wrapped his arms around her, trying to comfort and warm her. He unconsciously began to stroke the side of her head, running his fingers gently through her hair and moving his other hand in very small circles in the middle of her back. It was a technique he learned just a short time after Ron left the two of them during their hunt for the horcruxes. She had been nearly inconsolable when he left, feeling like he was abandoning them, even though that was technically what it was, and Harry had learned after her second night without sleep that it calmed her down. They had not slept apart since then, always taking comfort in their shared embraces. She was soothed by it, and Harry found he did not have nightmares from Voldemort during those nights as well.

How had he missed out on all of those feelings the last time around? Were love potions truly that strong?

"Harry," Ron began after finishing his chocolate and feeling better. "What the hell was that thing that you did?"

"The Patronus spell," Harry said, honestly paying more attention to Hermione after remembering how Ron had treated them both when he left the last time around, accidentally making his voice a little harder than normal, though no one noticed, thankfully. "It's a spell that's created from happy memories and the incantation 'Expecto Patronum' and fights off dementors and lethifolds and can be used to communicate."

"Wuh?" Ron looked absolutely flabbergasted.

"It also takes a really powerful wizard to create one, Harry." Remus Lupin said from the door. He was completely confused about how Harry knew his Marauder nickname, but decided that he and his friends had had enough excitement for the day and he could ask him later.

"Nah," Harry said, waving off the man's praise. "It's as much about the emotion used as it is the power. The memory makes it happen, but the power is really just to determine how strong it will be." Remus blinked at the strange answer.

"Must have been one hell of a memory," he said, causing Harry to think back on the memory he used and blush lightly.

"It was."

"What the hell kind of memory can make that thing?" Ron asked, feeling like he was out of the loop. Harry squeezed Hermione lightly, knowing she was listening to the whole thing, but felt answering would do no harm.

"Just a day I had about three weeks ago," Harry said evasively. Remus raised an eyebrow as he saw the nervous boy look away from them.

"What happened three weeks ago?" Ron asked, not being in a position to see Hermione blush, though Remus certainly could.

Harry looked at Ron and spoke in a clear, but sombre voice, "a sparkly eye thing." In his arms, he could feel Hermione tense slightly, but said nothing as Ron shook his head to clear it of the stuff that did not matter. Harry was a little curious about why Hermione reacted so poorly to the dementor's presence this time around. The last time it happened, it had not affected her nearly as strongly. She had fussed over him the entire ride to the castle once he had woken up. Remus decided that, while it was not the best way to meet his best friend's only son, it was certainly an amusing way.

"You three stay put. I'm going to get the driver to start moving the train and check on the other students," the older man said, hurrying out the door and to the engine car.

As soon as Remus left, Hermione pulled away from Harry, but not out of his arms. "Where did you learn that?" She asked softly, still trying to decide what his comment meant and what was actually happening between the two of them. She could realize there were more than just simple comments coming from him, but honestly had no clue if he was aware of it, or if it was honestly just this new Harry coming out and was unsure of how to find out.

"I practiced it over the summer," he said, not technically lying. "I heard about Sirius Black escaping and that dementors were looking for him. I got curious, so I found out some stuff about them and decided to learn to protect myself in case I ever met one since just being near one is painful."

"You got that right, mate." Ron said as she shivered in phantom pains. Hermione ignored Ron for the moment and kept her attention on Harry.

"Can you teach us?" She asked.

"Of course," Harry said, sounding surprised she would even think she had to ask. "Spend the rest of the day trying to remember your happiest memory. It has to be something that can make you feel happy or good just by remembering it, so nothing like a favorite book or location unless it's something that made a huge impact on you, like the first sight of Hogwarts or something, alright? Once you get that, the rest will be much easier." Hermione nodded, letting him know she understood as she cuddled into his chest. She had a strong suspicion she would be trying it out later in the evening with the same memory Harry said he had used himself. It was certainly one of the first that came to mind when the term 'happy memory' was used.

"Alright," she said. Harry looked at her a moment before snorting softly in amusement.

"Fine. If you're going to try it out later, just remember to use whatever memory has strong, good emotions and let it fill you before

you try and cast it," he said, knowing she would not wait until he tried to show her. Her reddening cheeks proved him right.

"Hey, Harry," Ron asked from beside them. "Got anymore of that chocolate?"

xXxXxXx

Minerva McGonagall watched the train pull into the station with her trademark scowl firmly in place. She could not understand why Albus had allowed the Ministry to let those bloody dementors stay near the school when they were obviously so dangerous. She had received a letter from Remus Lupin that they had stopped the Express and subjected the children to their horrible presence. The truly remarkable thing, however, was that Mr Potter was able to perform a fully corporeal Patronus if Remus' letter was to be believed.

Originally, she was going to balk at such a claim, but the man making it was not one who would embellish or lie about such matters. That made the situation even more amazing.

As the students began to unload themselves from the train, she saw the three students she had been looking for and immediately strode over to them. "Mister Potter, Miss Granger, Mister Weasley. It's good to see you again. Are any of you suffering affects from the dementors, still? Do any of you need any chocolate?" She watched them carefully as they each told her they were fine, though Ron accepted the chocolate.

"Good. Then Miss Granger, Mister Potter, I'd like you to accompany me to my office so we can discuss the details of your classes for this year. Mister Weasley, you may go ahead to the Great Hall and they will be with you shortly." Ron blinked at her a few moments before nodding.

"See you guys in a few minutes," he said glumly and got into a carriage. Harry and Hermione followed McGonagall into her own carriage, which left immediately for Hogwarts so they had a few extra minutes to talk before she was needed for announcing the first years.

Once they were seated and on their way to the castle, McGonagall looked at the two children across from her and noticed that they were sitting up against each other, even though there were several inches on either side of them. She would have to get to the Weasley twins as soon as she could and up her bet. "Are the two of you really alright? Dementors are horrible creatures," she said.

Both children shook their heads as Hermione turned her head to look at Harry, "No Professor. Harry and Professor Lupin drove them off as soon as one of them opened the door." Silently pleased that Hermione confirmed what Lupin had told her, McGonagall looked to Harry.

"Is this true, Mister Potter? You are able to produce a corporeal Patronus?" She asked, getting a nod in return as they neared the gates of Hogwarts.

Harry simply stuck his wand out of the window and called out, "Expecto Patronum," causing an immediate burst of silvery light to come out of his wand and form into Prongs all over again. Harry pulled his wand back and smiled at the shocked look on McGonagall's face as she watched the stag trot beside the carriage as an honor guard rather than disappear once Harry stopped focusing on it.

It was something he had never read directly from any book that a person's Patronus should disappear once the focus that created it was gone, so neither he or anyone who had seen him use the spell longer than a few seconds had ever noticed that it would remain. McGonagall, however, knew this to be the case and was doubly shocked to see it happening. She would have to speak with Albus about this later. A Patronus remaining and acting independent of the caster's thought was a sign of true mastery of the spell.

"Very impressive, Mister Potter. Where did you learn such an advanced spell? Most adults don't even know how to create one." She watched his cheeks redden slightly as Hermione looked at him carefully.

"He said it wasn't so difficult if you had a good memory for it," she told her favorite professor, wondering which to really believe. It would be a very Harry thing to do to say he cured aging and say it was nothing.

"It's not," Harry complained. "As long as you have a strong enough memory to use, the power that you need isn't so bad."

"I'll admit," McGonagall began, "that the power of the memory does indeed play a large part of it, but I've never actually seen any reports or papers written on the power being related to the memory itself," she said, sounding almost accusing. Simply put, Harry did not really like it.

"It's true. The first time I got any results at all, I had a memory of my parents from the Mirror of Erised. I couldn't get anything more than the misty shield until I had a different memory," he said, turning his head to look at Hermione for a quick moment before looking back at McGonagall. "Anyway, I used a memory that made me happier and got better results."

McGonagall noticed Hermione's face flush brilliantly just before the girl turned her head to look out the window and hide her face with her hair. 'I am going to have to triple my bet with the Weasleys,' she thought.

"Perhaps you can do some tests and write a paper on it, then. I'll give you extra credit." McGonagall almost flinched as Hermione's head whipped around to look at the older woman in shock. "Miss Granger, if you would like to help him with it, you may. You could be part of the control group, perhaps." McGonagall almost let out a relieved sigh as a momentary feeling of dread left her. That girl could be frightening sometimes.

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said, pleased to have something she could work on already. Harry chuckled lightly before looking at his Head of House.

"What about my classes did you want to talk about, Professor?"

"I just wanted to confirm that you still wish to take the electives you owed me," she said as the carriage came to a stop and they began to exit. "It'll be more work and I wanted to ensure you were up to the task."

"Of course, Professor. I've thought about it and made my decision," he said resolutely. "I'm perfectly happy with them now." McGonagall

offered a small smile, honestly proud of the boy and whatever Hermione had done to get him to think ahead.

"Very good. I only have one last question for you before you head to the Great Hall," she said. "How did you manage learn the Patronus spell over the summer and not receive any warnings for the use of underage magic?" She watched as he turned to her with wide and shocked eyes.

"I thought Dumbledore would have told you," he said. "I emancipated myself just after the summer started and became immune to the underage magic restrictions. Even then, Potter Manor has protective wards on it that would have allowed me to practice underage magic if I were so set on it and not exempt from the rule."

McGonagall blinked and stared at Harry blankly for several moments, trying to figure out why Albus had not told her about it. But at least now she understood why he used Fawkes to communicate with him. "No, he didn't, but it isn't his place to tell me every little thing, either," she said, defending the headmaster in front of the students while plotting the best way to yell at the man later. "So, you're living at Potter Manor now?"

"Yes, I do," Harry said, smiling. "It's a lot better than the Dursleys' home."

"Very well, then. Thank you for telling me," she said. "You may head to the Great Hall. The others should be here shortly. I will speak with Miss Granger and you should have her shortly."

"Not a problem, Professor. Take all the time you need," he said, unable to resist slightly emphasizing the one word he knew they would be discussing. He smiled innocently as McGonagall eyed him with narrowed eyes. Had she told Hermione about it, she would have thought the girl would have told him, but she had not told the girl anything about the time-turner yet.

"Thank you, Mister Potter. You may go now," she told him stiffly.

"See you soon, Harry," Hermione said, finally seeing a place where she could enter the conversation.

"G'bye Hermione." Harry offered her a smile and began to walk away, smiling brightly. He paused outside of the doors to the Great Hall and waited until the two women turned a corner to McGonagall's office before pulling a letter out of his pocket. "Dobby!"

"Yes, Master Harry?" The house elf asked as he appeared with a soft pop.

"Can you please find Peeves and give him this note?" He asked, handing the paper to Dobby.

"Yes, sir! Dobby is doing that, Master Harry!" Quickly, he took the paper and popped away as Harry heard the rumble and excited chatter of the first group to come with the carriages.

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] - Thanks for reading.



## Chapter6 – We Are Legion

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Added disclaimer (for the whole of the story): I do not own Thundercats and am willing to take names if anyone has any that are better for the creatures you will read about roughly three quarters of the way through the chapter (or so.)

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "To Stand Against the Darkness" by Muggledad (H/Hr)

xXx Previously xXx

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[edit]

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xXx STORY xXx

Hermione followed her Head of House to her office and tried to think back on the scene she had just recently witnessed. Harry had suddenly become someone ... not different, really, but more profoundly Harry. His presence seemed to suddenly fill the room and impress upon her to listen and obey. The Harry in that compartment radiated command and authority that had made Hermione lose her breath and caused all of her rapid thought processes to simply end and command her to stare and follow him, wherever he led her. It had been a frightening and thrilling sensation to come to the realization that the Harry she had witnessed come forth on several occasions in the past, but restrained and muffled by abuse, innate shyness and fear of being visible and failing, where any faults could be seen, had seemed to suddenly break free of its restraints and take its proper place.

While she knew that Harry absolutely loathed his fame and that people seemed to deify him as some savior, and she certainly knew who Harry truly was inside, the side that the wizarding world thought he was had its place inside of him as well.

This had been that side of him, and it absolutely thrilled her to see it. It thrilled her to experience it.

It also confused the hell out of her. Harry had called Professor Lupin 'Moony', which was most certainly not on the man's briefcase or any identifiable places on his person and yet the man answered, but appeared confused to be called that, meaning Harry had not met him over the summer. Then there was the fact that he was capable of an extremely advanced charm. The Patronus, according to two professors, was not something the average third year should be capable of. And not only does he say it's nothing, but says the very foundation of what they know about it is wrong. All of this, along with everything she had been learning over the summer in correspondence with him, was making Harry one odd enigma. As a

rule, Hermione tried to solve puzzles when she was presented with them.

"I must say, Miss Granger. I am thoroughly impressed with your influence on Mister Potter," McGonagall said as she sat in her chair with a hand to the other for Hermione. "The way he speaks, holds himself and, if our ride to the castle was any indication, his mental aptitude has risen greatly. I can only hope to see this continue into the coming year."

Hermione blushed at the ill-gotten praise her Head of House was offering before shaking her head. "Oh, no Professor. Actually, Harry seemed to suddenly be different at the end of last year and we only exchanged a few letters through the summer until recently when I've been spending time at his home. We've had discussions about our essays and general theories of magic, but not much else. Everything is Harry's doing, Professor."

Minerva blinked with a blank expression over her face for a few seconds before frowning and placing her arms on her desk to brace herself as she leaned forward, closer to Hermione. "Are you telling me, Miss Granger, that you had nothing to do with the changes in Harry? He simply made the decision to change so drastically on his own?" The reasons Harry had given in his letter were easily strong enough to understand the changes Harry had gone through, but such drastic changes were simply not heard of in children this young. Well, not such drastic changes in a good sense, anyway. Still, though. A twelve-year old boy facing off against a sixty-three foot basilisk on his own, with a nearly dead girl on the ground and wielding nothing but a sword was probably one of those things that was likely to change a person.

"Yes, Ma'am. Throughout the whole summer, we talked about pretty much anything we could think of and he had a much deeper view and understanding of just about everything as if he'd been going as in depth as that in the past. You should read his essays, Professor! They're absolutely incredible!" Hermione's voice expressed her disbelief and shock by the end, her hands waving about wildly in equal exasperation. McGonagall was intrigued, but far more amused at the young witch's antics and used the experience she had long-since obtained from the Weasley twins' antics to withhold her laughter.

"I shall take note to read his Transfiguration essay, then. Now, about your schedule for this year," McGonagall said as she pulled out a small cherry wood box. "Dumbledore went through a lot of trouble to get this item for you to allow you to meet the classes you had expressed to me you had hopes of getting into."

"Ma'am?" Hermione asked. She had asked McGonagall before the previous year had ended multiple times about scheduling conflicts between Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, Divination and Muggle Studies. She had heard from McGonagall that Divination was just about the worst possible class she could hope to get into while she believed Muggle Studies was only a little behind modern times when Hermione said she was excited to learn how the wizarding world viewed the muggle world.

After Harry had explained what he learned about the classes, she had gone to Diagon Alley and looked at the books for Muggle Studies and had been horrified that, not only was much of the information inaccurate, but nearly a hundred years old unless it was material that also directly influenced the wizarding world, such as Hitler and his work with Grindelwald. Even then, the information was minimal or showed the muggle side of events in a poor or foolish light.

It would not have been a problem any longer if it would not have meant separating from Harry and Ron during their classes. They were, for all intents and purposes, her only real friends. She could count Neville and Ginny, of course, and the rest of the Weasleys, but she had a strange sense of 'mine' when it concerned Harry and Ron. They were her friends and most importantly, she was their's as well.

That had been her primary focus in taking Divination, in particular, after McGonagall had advised that it was a nearly meaningless class to take. Making sure to look after her two boys was sometimes a time-consuming job, but one she felt she had to take. It was her duty to help them as her closest and dearest friends. She kept them in line, usually, after all.

"Within this box, Miss Granger, is a highly restricted device called a time-turner. It allows a person to go backward in time for up to a maximum of thirty-six hours or multiple people going much shorter

distances back," McGonagall said, watching Hermione's widening eyes carefully.

"Time travel?" Hermione squeaked. "I didn't think that was even possible!"

"Yes," McGonagall nodded, "it is. However, there are very strict rules governing the use of these devices, which is why I am going to ask that you never tell anyone, even Misters Potter and Weasley, that you have this device. Do you understand me?" She asked, staring intently at the girl in front of her. "If you feel even the slightest doubt you can do this, or use this properly, let me know so we do not start something we should not. I can understand any hesitancy to keeping secrets from your friends, but I must stress how it is important that no one knows about this."

After a moment's thought, Hermione nodded. "Yes Ma'am. I won't say anything unless they figure something out. After all, Ron is going to be in some of the classes with me while Harry is in the others. It may be best to let them know at some point, or they will talk and say I'm in both of their classes."

"Yes, Mister Potter changing his schedule will complicate the matter a bit as Dumbledore had obtained this device before he requested his changes, but I feel they could maintain the secret if needed, but we should endeavor to only bring them into the loop if necessary, yes?" McGonagall asked, getting a nod in return.

"Good. If you feel one of them is suspicious, you may bring them in, but do try to get my assistance first. Now, the rules are really quite simple. Under no circumstances should you allow any younger versions of yourself to see any older versions as most who have done so have gone quite mad in attempts to figure out what they will need to do in order to make everything the same as they saw it from their younger version's point of view. Also, no matter the cost, you cannot go back in time to change something to happen differently than you know it already happened as."

"Is this the paradox theory? That it would create an infinite time loop that would be impossible to break or possibly unravel the fabric of time?" Hermione asked with a sinking feeling in her stomach. McGonagall sighed before nodding.

"Those are a few of the prevailing theories, yes. There are a few others as well, but all have the exact same warning to never change anything that you already know happens a specific way. To do so could spell disaster in a way that we cannot even begin to fathom. Do you understand?"

"Yes Ma'am. I do."

"Excellent. Now that the most important rule is out of the way, a few of the smaller rules are to not use this device needlessly as it raises the risk of causing problems and you do age at your normal rate as you physically go back. Also, it has been shown that those who use the device for an extended number of uses in a short period of time will sometimes cease to exist. While you don't have to fear that for your schedule, since it has only been shown in those who abuse the power ridiculously, I mention it to make sure you understand some of the dangers inherent in abusing this power."

"Yes Ma'am," Hermione said, nodding. "I understand."

"Very well, Miss Granger. Then I will show you how this device works now and you may look up more information in the library at your leisure or come to me at any time to discuss it as you need."

"Ma'am, shouldn't we be getting down to the Great Hall? You'll be late for sorting the first years and ..." Hermione trailed off as McGonagall held the silver and gold hourglass in her hand with a slightly bemused expression on her face. "Oh."

"It has the power to send two people short times back instead of one person further, so we shall be fine, Miss Granger." McGonagall's smile widened slightly as Hermione blushed and made a noncommittal noise. Setting the device down, she began to go over the remaining rules and functions of the necklace.

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Harry waited for Dobby to leave and then smiled in the sadistic way he had been practicing for his encounters with Draco for the coming years, though he would never admit to staring into the mirror to make sure he got it just right. He had plans to have many a cause to offer such a smile to the youngest Malfoy and many of the Death Eater sympathizers. He turned and left the classroom before

heading straight to the courtyard where the students would arrive so he would not be forced to be singled out yet again.

Looking out at the series of carriages that had students coming out of them for his wayward redheaded friend, he had time to stand there, alone and unobserved and had a reflective moment and took note of some of the faces he had known and had come to know in the years before being returned to his past.

He saw Cedric Diggory, laughing with another Hufflepuff as they got out of the first series of carriages; a benefit of being older and bigger than other students. Harry could still feel a pang of guilt and sorrow when he remembered watching the brave boy take guard over Harry when both were spirited away in Harry's original fourth year during the Tri-Wizard Tournament where he was killed without a second thought.

Cho Chang, the girl he thought he had fancied at one point, though it turned out to be an unwitting potion-induced fling, and who had even slapped him silly when he left their date in Hogsmeade when Hermione had told Harry she had needed him. In retrospect, though, he probably should have tried to appear less pleased to have the opportunity to have left Madam Puddifoot's. The teashop was amongst the things that had haunted his dreams during his better nights, sometimes.

That was an experience he was hoping to avoid this time around, even if it were with Hermione.

He saw Draco Malfoy, turned death eater during the summer after their sixth year after Snape had killed Dumbledore in front of Harry, even though Snape did not know Harry was hiding under Dumbledore's disillusionment charm. Malfoy's two cronies were at his side, both now and then, and would probably remain there.

Harry saw a shock of red hair that turned out to be Ron when the crowds thinned enough for Harry to see the boy and he set out immediately to catch up with him before he saw a small shimmer of blonde hair, walking alone about half way between them.

Harry remembered this girl, too; Luna Lovegood. She had been one of the oddest people Harry had ever known, but turned out to have always been fiercely loyal to Harry and his friends. During his

original fifth year, Harry had gotten to know the quirky Ravenclaw. It had been almost frightening how badly she had not only wanted friendship, from anybody, but desperately craved it. Harry was not above admitting that it was just as bad as he had been when he first came into the wizarding world. The only difference, however, was that she had gone four years in Hogwarts not only without friends, but being mocked, ridiculed and tormented during those years, by her own house mates more than anyone else, no less. Not once during the entire fifth year had she complained about them, but he had learned at the end of the year how they had always stolen her things and hidden them about the school, even making her walk around barefoot during the winter months.

'Oh hell no. That isn't happening this time around,' Harry thought. His whole purpose was to make things better than they had been after being given a second chance. To kill Voldemort and make the right choices this time around. She had proven to be a loyal and valuable friend during his last life, even admitting to him after a DA meeting once that she had loved the group so much because it was 'what having friends must feel like'. If that was not a plea for friendship and help, Harry did not know what was. He had allowed his own insecurities and uncomfortable feelings to influence how he interacted with her, not wanting to stand out more than he already did the last time through, almost ignoring those silent calls for friendship to leave her just as alone as she had always been. She had been hurting. And he could help her. Screw what the world thought.

"Hey. It's Luna, right?" Harry asked, realizing he was already walking beside the blonde girl by the time he had made his choice. The girl in question turned to him and blinked her silver-gray eyes slowly before smiling serenely and nodding once.

"Yes, it is. Welcome back, Harry. It's good to see you again." After smiling again, she turned to look forward as both continued on, though Harry's eyes had widened considerably.

"Erm, 'again'? Have we actually met before?" He asked, absolutely terrified. The girl had always shown a frightening ability to be where she had been needed during his fifth year and seemed to hold back when he had needed to talk and was either on the outs with Ron or did not feel comfortable talking with Hermione. Especially regarding the loss of Sirius, since she had dealt with the loss of her mother.



Harry had toyed with the notion that Luna was a Seer or something similar, but had never truly believed that to be the case. Now? Now he was not so sure.

"I don't believe so," Luna said, frowning in thought. "But it felt like the right thing to say at the moment. We must always trust in our instincts, don't you agree?"

Harry had to admit, Luna was an odd cookie, but she was unique in her own way. "Yes, we do," he agreed while nodding. He simply attributed her comment to being either her odd personality coming through or referring to returning to the school. "Anyway, I had a few reasons I wanted to talk with you about. First, I'd like to order a subscription to The Quibbler. Second, I was wondering if you could tell me where I could find some books, scrolls or other archives on Snorkacks, wizarding bedtime stories, fairy legends and folklore and, lastly, I was wondering if you wanted to join Ron, Hermione and I for breakfast tomorrow."

Luna stopped walking suddenly and turned to look at Harry with her head cocked slightly to the side. Harry almost felt uncomfortable, but had remembered her doing this the first time they had begun speaking. It was something of a defense against people who were being nice to her only to trick her later, but she could detect no such motives in Harry, which confused her greatly. Even worse, he felt different than the average person. It was not his power. She had always been able to sense his power from almost anywhere in the castle, though it was absolutely massive at the moment. But his very life energy felt different. Almost denser, if such a thing were possible. As if he were more solidly within the world. It oddly reminded Luna of her mother.

"I'm sure I can get you a subscription. My father owns the newspaper, after all. Most other things can be found in either Flourish and Blotts or Hogwarts' library, though there is no known information on Snorkacks, I'm afraid," she said. "I'm saddened to say that the Ministry dictates what we are allowed to have access to."

"Yes," Harry nodded, "they do. They're a bunch of bigoted and power-hungry people who are out for themselves and would rather ignore something they don't understand than to admit that it exists."

Luna continued to look ahead as they walked towards the Great Hall as the third wave of carriages was unloading and tried to figure out the boy walking along with her. It was odd to be approached by someone who was not planning to be mean or nasty to her, and she did not really expect such things from Harry Potter. While she did not subscribe to the notions of him being the hero the wizarding world proclaimed of him, she did know that he was truly a hero in his own right. Just because of the boy he was. And knowing who he was, she decided to take the risk.

"Agreed. I suppose I can sit with you in the morning if you're there before I am so long as you think Hermione and Ronald wouldn't mind?" She asked, wondering what his two friends thought. Harry remembered their original reactions to her and, while Ron was certainly not happy, Hermione was friendly enough, and was only thrown off guard by the blonde's thought processes. She had made fun of Luna a bit, even calling her names, but it had always been when Luna wasn't around. And he couldn't say he wasn't a party to that. He had been just as bad, which was something he regretted. But at least now he could fix it.

"They'll be fine with it. Hermione is just as intelligent as you are, but has a very literal mind, so she may feel out of her element, but you'll like her, I believe. Ron is a bit crude and rash, but mostly a decent guy. He just doesn't think of other people's feelings before his own. He's a good friend though, and comes to his senses pretty quick."

Luna did not believe Ronald Weasley was as good of a friend as Harry thought, but was not about to risk alienating a new, though unexpected, friendship over it. She had learned to deal with far worse than a thirteen-year old boy's cruelty and ignorance. "Very well. I'll see you in the morning, Harry."

"Great! See you later, Luna!" Harry said happily with a final wave before heading to where he had kept an eye on Ron while Luna puzzled over the curiously warm feeling in her chest.

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"Welcome students, new and old, to another wonderful year at Hogwarts," Dumbledore said from his place behind the podium on the teacher's dais. "As you all have noticed, no doubt, Hogwarts is playing host to dementors, which would normally be guarding

Azkaban. However, with the escape of Sirius Black, they will instead be guarding Hogwarts now. Please remain within Hogwarts' grounds at all times and do not provoke them, as they are quite deadly and will not see the difference between an enemy and student if attacked or provoked in any way."

Harry frowned on his bench as he looked out at the students around him. The faces he looked at ranged from outright fear to confusion and one unconcerned Ravenclaw who was batting her radish earrings back and forth. He wondered why Dumbledore had allowed the dementors onto the school grounds, or if he honestly did not have the authority to say no to the Minister. He had always assumed Albus Dumbledore was basically the most powerful person in their government, but could not think of a single reason Dumbledore would allow the soul-sucking beasts to remain when he remembered the old man been emphatically against their placement there. At least, that was what he remembered, but he could never really remember the old man actually saying as much. Just that he knew Dumbledore hated them.

"I ask that any student who needs to go outside to not do so alone, but in pairs if not more at a time. We do not want to have any accidents occur." Dumbledore wanted to scare the children enough to get them to realize the true danger the dementors posed to them, but not so much they had needless worries from those who would be overly terrified.

"Now that the real dangers are discussed, the usual start of term announcements may be made. Mister Filch has once again updated his list of contraband items, which may be seen on his office door. The Forbidden Forest is off limits to everyone with no exceptions. There is to be no magic use in the hallways between classes..."

Harry tuned out the Headmaster as he looked at Hermione from the corner of his eye, her face flushed with excitement as she played with the chain around her neck, repeatedly touching as if to make sure it was still there. She had walked in only moments after he and Ron had, coming from the side door with McGonagall rather than the large, double doors the students normally used. He was somewhat amused at her excuse of McGonagall wanting to discuss her Transfiguration essay for being taken by their Head of House when Ron had asked. He had felt a brief moment of shame when he realized he had originally bought the excuse as readily as Ron had.

McGonagall hadn't even received their essays yet, and no essay would be worth the inconvenience of missing her duties required by the sorting.

There would be a lot more reading this time around.

As Dumbledore's voice faded and the food appeared on the tables with the wood groaning and creaking in protest, Harry pondered on his plans. For the past two months, his primary focus was first on doing the very things Lora had told him to do, basically being to get his body healed with a growth spurt and nutrient potions, train for strength and physical prowess and get established in his new home and life while developing his mental defenses.

On top of that, he had focused his mind onto a few smaller areas where he wanted to get up to speed in. He had worked on silent spell casting and wandless magics, read up on horcruxes and how to destroy them and read as thoroughly as he could on his two new classes; Runes and Arithmancy, since those were really the only subjects he had no clue about, and then on the most important things he wanted to change for this coming year. He wanted to try and catch Wormtail, but knew he had to let the rat live so that he would not totally ruin the timeline he was expecting more than he already had and he wanted to give his Godfather and Moony a reason to be happy with their Godson. Or was it to follow in their footsteps?

His plans for Draco and the coming months would probably do both, so perhaps semantics did not matter so much.

The problem, however, was he had not truly figured out what he was going to do during the year beyond playing the role of his third year self and perhaps starting the Defense Association a little earlier than before. It was going to be needed. There would be no doubts of that when things got serious.

And now, after 'meeting' Luna all over again, he decided he would make a point of befriending her and several of the others he knew would be worth getting to know. People were younger and had not yet embraced the darkness as fully. Or the light. If he could catch some of them now and stop them, or get some spies of his own, then it would only help.

He had a brief and revolting moment of insight of Dumbledore thinking those very same things when Ron's voice broke him out of his reverie.

"Hey Harry, where'd you learn to cast a Patronus, anyway? That's a hard spell to learn," Ron said through a mouth full of food, seemingly having forgotten the very same question being asked on the train earlier. It had also been where he got his current information, since he hadn't heard of it until that very day. Hermione quickly moved her plate slightly away from the hungry redhead with a frown.

"I learned it a little while ago after some practice," Harry said with a shrug. While not exactly a lie, it was grossly understating the truth. "I'm actually planning on showing you guys how to do it."

"That would be wicked!" Ron said after swallowing. "Can you imagine? Being able to do such a powerful spell so young?" He smiled brightly as he took a big bite of his chicken leg.

"I can imagine, yes," Hermione said. "And I am looking forward to learning the spell. When do you plan on teaching us, Harry?"

"Well, I was planning to teach you next weekend after we get our schedules and back into the rhythm of our classes and the like," he said before noticing Hermione's scowl. "Er, of course, I c-could always make this weekend available?" He stuttered nervously. It was strange how a twelve-year old girl scared the crap out of him. Even if it was Hermione.

Hermione beamed at him before turning to begin cutting up her chicken breast. "Good idea. It will make things so much safer," she finished with a pointed look right at him, hinting it was safer for him than those learning the spell if the way she held her knife was any indication.

"Er, right then." He pulled at his collar and cleared his throat. "Well, I've invited Luna Lovegood to have breakfast with us tomorrow. Is that okay?" he asked, hoping to change the subject to anything else.

"Loony? You're having us sit with Loony Lovegood?" Ron asked incredulously, splaying his mashed potatoes over his plate in shock.

Hermione frowned slightly to herself, wondering why Harry wanted to invite another girl to their breakfast. "Who's Luna Lovegood?" She asked.

"Only the battiest girl you'll ever meet!" Ron spluttered. "Why are you inviting her over?"

"Luna Lovegood," Harry emphasized with a glare at Ron and pointing towards the girl in question who was blissfully eating a spoonful of pudding, "is a second year Ravenclaw who is ostracized from her house mates and always called 'Loony' by people who don't really understand her and-"

"What's to understand?" Ron interrupted. "She's barmy! She's always talking about creatures that don't exist, her dad writes in a newspaper about things that don't exist and she's always saying weird stuff! She used to play with Ginny at the Burrow all the time, mate. Trust me, she's absolutely nutters."

Harry frowned and turned to look and speak directly to Hermione. "She does talk about creatures that no one knows about, but that isn't to say they aren't really there and we just can't see them. I mean, we know that most creatures wizards know about are things muggles believe to not exist, after all. And her dad owns a newspaper called 'The Quibbler' that he writes about many of those creatures and a bunch of conspiracy theories, like a muggle tabloid."

"She's been almost completely alone since her mother died a few years ago and, because of her oddities, the other Ravenclaws either have nothing to do with her or torment her, even stealing her shoes at times so she walks around barefoot." Harry leaned a little closer, even though a disgusted Ron was now no longer paying nearly as much attention to them and lowered his voice.

"She is a lot like I was before I met you and Ron. She has no friends, and those that might befriend her are warned off by others to stop it from happening, she's mocked and tormented and she needs some friends." Harry looked Hermione directly in the eyes and tried to convey the full impact of what he was wanting to get across.

"She's almost as smart as you, Hermione, and just as nice. She is a little odd, yes, but I think you could like her if you're willing to look past her oddities, which are probably so strange because she's

been alone for so long, and get to know her to make your own judgement."

Hermione was not sure what she should be feeling as Harry spoke so highly and with so much conviction about a girl she did not yet know. Especially when he looked at her with those eyes that basically begged her to accept the younger blonde. She could not recall really seeing the girl before, or hearing anything about her. Ron obviously had poor things to say about the Ravenclaw, but he had many such bad things to say about her as well, and usually right to her face. There was no telling what he said about her behind her back. But that just simply meant his opinion was not worth nearly as much if anything Harry had to say was correct.

"We can meet her, Harry. If nothing else, we can at least give her a chance to be a friend."

Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and squeezed it gently, rubbing his thumb over the top of her hand in a gentle caress to convey his appreciation. "Thanks, Hermione." He let her hand go and both began to eat in silence while contemplating their own thoughts.

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Harry looked around the dorm room and listened for the distinctive sounds of each boy's snores. After assuring himself that he was the only one awake, he silently slipped out of his bed and into his Hogwarts robe from earlier that very day and grabbed his invisibility cloak. He carefully made his way out and through the common room, making sure no one was around as he went into the hall and quickly took off to an empty classroom not far from the Gryffindor tower where Peeves was waiting, muttering about crazy students before he noticed Harry.

"Alright, I'm here! The elf gave me this letter," Peeves said petulantly, thrusting the letter out to Harry, "and you said you had presents for Peeves! Peeves wants his presents!"

Harry smiled and waved the excitable spook down as he took a seat. "Peeves, I have a very large box that is absolutely full of fun little items that will leave you pranking happily for several months, if not most of the year. Are you interested?"

Peeves narrowed his eyes as he lowered himself to appear to be sitting across from Harry and pretended to think about it. "What would I have to do for these items?" He asked suspiciously.

"There would be three rules that you have to follow, and they're all yours.."

"And what rules are those?"

"Rule one is that I don't want you to prank myself, or a very small list of my friends; Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, the Weasleys, Neville Longbottom or Susan Bones, as we really don't want her aunt to get upset, and we don't want to prank any first years. While your pranks are usually quite hilarious," he said, buttering the poltergeist up a little, "we don't want to risk them getting hurt or upset. Also, you don't want to prank any of the faculty except maybe Snape and Filch or you're likely to get into serious trouble."

Peeves thought for a few moments before nodding. It was not going to be as much fun as pranking the whole school, but worth it if the box of goodies was as good as he said. "I can do that. What else?"

"Rule two is if you see my friends or I in the halls, you don't rat us out and, if we're about to get caught, maybe distract whoever it is to let us get away or warn us if someone is about to come. If we get caught, then there is less of a chance that I can get more of this stuff in later and you get to play with it when I do I know you like to get students in trouble and get them caught, but pranking is more worth it, but the third rule is going to make you very happy, I believe."

Peeves wanted to be upset about the second rule, but his attention span was really quite small, and the way Harry finished the rule left him unable to think about anything but figuring out what rule three was, even if he agreed blindly to rule two. "What's rule three?"

"Do you agree to rule number two?" Harry asked.

"Yes, yes! Now what's rule three and why will Peeves like it?"

"Rule three is my personal favorite, actually," Harry said with the fiendish smile he had been practicing, exciting Peeves even more. "I am going to supply you with all sorts of prank items, but I would like



you to find out what Ravenclaws, in particular, keep taking Luna Lovegood's things, and letting me know so that I know, but so that we can make plans to create a massive prank against them and possible some Slytherins. And along with this, I want you to focus at least one prank a week on Draco Malfoy. Do we have a deal?"

Peeves' mist-like eyes lit up in an unholy glee as he realized what he was being offered. Prime prank materials for who knows how long. And all it took was following rules so easy, even he could not forget them! "If Potty's box of goodies is as good as he says it is, then we have a deal!"

Harry smiled again and pulled out his old, school trunk, miniaturized for ease of transport, and set it on the ground before turning back to Peeves. "Actually, I'd like to add one more rule, but it's not something that will make things any less fun for you," he said, watching Peeves pout petulantly.

"Rules, rules, rules! Why more rules? Fine! What rule?" The ghost asked with a huff, crossing his hands over his hazy chest and sticking his tongue out at Harry while crossing his eyes.

"If you ever see me, my friends or the Weasley twins out and about and we ask for help with a prank, consider helping us out. You don't have to, but just think about it, at least."

Peeves sighed dramatically and tossed his hands up into the air. "Fine, fine. If you can't prank on your own, Peeves will think about helping. Now what's in Potty's box?"

Harry smiled and enlarged the trunk as he began to list items off. "We have the usual nasties that I all but bought out the pranking shop like dung bombs and the like. But I took the liberty of getting you a bunch of new toys to play with as well from the muggle world."

"Oh?" Peeves asked, peering into the trunk that he idly noticed no longer had Harry's name on it, meaning he could not leave it as evidence as he had thought about. "What things can muggles do to prank with?"

"There is powder in here that can cause a person to begin itching after several minutes that won't show up with magical scans, there are over ten thousand paint balls, which are little balls about the size

of a large marble that are filled with paint and explode when they hit something, I got a slingshot for you to fire them off, with," Harry said with a smile.

"There are about a thousand balloons, Snapping Dragons, which are little noise makers that make a loud pop, chocolate candies that are filled with laxatives and a whole bunch of things that will keep you entertained for a while."

Peeves was giggling over a canister of itching powder when Harry looked back at him. "Oh, Peeves likes! I think this will go quite well in the Slytherin bog rolls!"

Harry's face betrayed his horror at the concept of itching powder placed on something that would come into contact with such a sensitive area. "Peeves ... You're a bloody genius!"

Peeves cackled madly as he raised into the air and twirled about happily.

"One last thing, Peeves," Harry said right before leaving the room, causing the spectre to hover in the air with a balloon over his head like a plastic bag.

"Mmph hmph?"

"There are going to be a lot of tiny creatures walking the halls soon. They're going to be part of a prank I'm pulling for a little while. Don't hurt them, alright? They're going to torment anyone who isn't nice to them."

Peeves nodded before suddenly acting as if he could not breathe and was suffocating. Harry simply shook his head and left the room, leaving Peeves to die in peace.

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Nearly an hour later, Harry had transfigured the last of a hundred different pebbles supplied by the Room of Requirement into tiny little creatures of his own design. They were humanoid in shape, but had tails like cats or foxes, depending on his mood at the time of transfiguring them, and ears to match. He had also given them

whiskers and cat-like eyes, all with brown eyes except for a few that he had wanted to be gold, blue, pink, red or silver out of amusement.

He had created them with different colors of fur for their ears, tails and the fur on their cat-like heads; white, brown, black, white that hinted at pink, blue or silver, depending on his mood at the time and now all were standing at attention in lines in front of him like tiny, furry soldiers.

Taking a moment to look over his handiwork, he stepped back and began to wave his wand in large, slow sweeps across the group of animal-like creatures ahead of him and began to mumble and picture within his mind the parameters of the spell he was planning to force out through his wand, using it like a battery to store all of the information he was adding into the spell.

He envisioned personalities, quirks, voices, missions and every aspect of the faux life he was hoping to give them, pushing every single iota of power at his control and every aspect he came up with into his wand, which began to glow and hum as it gained more power, pulsing with each new command given and stored within.

The spell was something he had found within the book Lora had given him in the dueling section, normally used to animate battle dummies so that they could fight their creator with real tactics rather than sitting still and reflecting curses, much like the dueling dummies the Room of Requirement had originally given him and the defense group during his fifth year. The spell was meant to create an animated dummy that had traits placed into the spell, and actually used the caster's own mental structure as a foundation, simply creating a copy of the mind with the tweaks requested and putting it into the target. This would normally create an animated dummy that was nearly identical in mind to the one who cast the spell. Normally, that would give the caster an opponent who fought with their own ability and power, but using different tactics.

However, this was not normal.

The spell was originally intended for one target, not nearly a hundred. Harry had come to use it constantly during his practice duels in the large expanse of yard behind his family's home. It was Harry's belief that he had enough power, and thus would be able to shorten his casting time by a hundred times, if he cast it in a wide

arc over all of his creations at once. It was not, however, meant to be used as such.

And it was certainly not meant to be cast in a magical room that became whatever the user needed, or required, either.

The Room of Requirement, sensing Harry's intentions and methods, realized a new requirement for itself, based on Harry's needs at that moment, just before he cast his spell. It sensed each of those transfigured creations were meant to be sentient and have the ability to make their own choices and take their own actions and effectively become his servants and everything that Harry placed into his wand to be commanded over the large group was taken by the room.

By the time Harry had thought up every single thing he wanted his creations to contain, his wand was glowing with the intensity of a Solaris spell, pulsing quickly and humming loudly as if a tiny sun was fighting wildly to escape his hands. Had Harry's attention been on the outside world and not on maintaining the powerful spell in his hands, he would have realized the wand was in fact vibrating within his hands and the power escaping ever half a second was washing over the him, causing his robes and hair to flap about madly.

Once he was finished with the details, Harry released his spell in a chaotic rush from his wand, causing a literal wave of magic to wash over the tiny creatures in front of him and enter each one, silently directed and altered by the room itself.

As the last vestiges of power drained from his hands, Harry fell to his knees in sudden exhaustion, panting heavily. He looked up to see the mass of creatures in front of him looking around in wonderment and confusion before putting their attention to their master, aligning themselves to his will.

As one, they spoke. "We are Legion."

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Albus Dumbledore, Leader of the International Confederation of Wizards, the Wizengamot and Headmaster for the school of Hogwarts leaned back in his private tub and pondered the situation he found himself in.

On one hand, he was enjoying a nice and, although longer than he originally intended, long, leisurely soak in his private bathing chamber before heading down to breakfast. This bathing chamber was one that no one but himself and his Deputy Headmistress could enter, the latter only in the case of emergencies.

On the other hand, some little creature and his two even littler compatriots had just ran off with his towels and, if he was not mistaken, another had his sack of lemon drops over his shoulder like he were holding Santa's toy sack and all four of the little buggers had threatened to shave his beard during the middle of the night if he tried to stop them.

Had he not been absolutely confused about the little creatures' existence to begin with, he would have had the forethought to summon his precious lemon drops back to himself, but they were already gone before he had even come back to his senses.

'I do believe it is time to get a cat.'

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Harry yawned as he walked into the common room, still setting his Hogwarts robes to rights. He had been up for an additional two hours the night before, just giving his newest prank, though he wanted to call them minions, their orders. While they already knew most of what was expected of them, Harry had wanted to be absolutely sure everything was set straight with them and had not been disappointed.

"Good morning, Harry. Did you sleep well? You look exhausted," Hermione greeted from the couch where she had been reading as she got up and walked over to him.

"Once I got to sleep, yes. I slept rather well. Good morning to you, too." Harry reached down and petted Crookshanks, who was rubbing against Harry's leg and purring furiously. It suddenly made him realize he had not even been bothered with knowing Peter Pettigrew had been in the same room the night before with his mind so preoccupied.

"Where's Ron," she asked. "He's normally down right with you."

"He's still getting ready and said to go ahead," he said as they walked towards the portrait hole. "I don't think he fancies sitting with Luna at the moment. So I figure you can get a chance to meet her without him for a few minutes. Might be a bit less awkward."

Hermione decided not to respond, being more pleased about not watching Ron eat than meeting a new person. However, as they were walking down the hall, she noticed a tiny little fur person, perhaps a foot and a half tall, running down the hall away from her and Harry, followed momentarily by a second one. "What in the world are those?" She asked, more to herself than Harry.

"I'm thinking of calling them 'Thundercats'. But I'm not sure," Harry replied with a self-pleased grin before thinking, making Hermione look at him through narrowed eyes.

"You're 'thinking about calling them' that? What do you mean?"

Harry nodded and smiled at the bushy-haired one. "I made them. There are about a hundred of them, and they're going to serve a few purposes. I'm going to use them to keep an eye on the school, especially to keep an eye out for Sirius Black," he said, not hinting at exactly why he wanted to keep an eye on the escapee, "and they are totally harmless, unless you are mean or rude to them, at which point, they'll prank you. If you're kind, they'll be very friendly."

Hermione blinked at Harry as she thought over what he had just said. Some was understandable, some was a little weird. But one thought was more prevalent than the rest. "You made them? How? What are they? And why are you calling them 'Thundercats', anyway?"

"They were pebbles, but I transfigured them and used an animation charm that I use for dueling practice to animate dummies to fight back with. I can set their personalities. They won't harm anyone, but they will prank people if they aren't shown respect or kindness. And I called them 'Thundercats' because there was this cartoon called that that Dudley watched for a little while about humanoid cats from some planet somewhere. Thundara, or Thunderific or something like that."

Hermione sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose as it began to click together. "Let me guess. These are the 'tiny ones' you told Malfoy about?"

Harry just grinned impishly at her.

xXxXxXx

Harry and Hermione had sat at the Gryffindor table and filled their plates when a petite blonde girl stood across from them on the other side of the table, holding a furry little friend in her arms as one would hold a baby. The little creature was purring loudly and had its eyes closed in a euphoric bliss as the girl scratched it under the chin. "Hello," she said simply.

"Hey Luna, take a seat," Harry said with a smile and gestured at the spot in front of himself and Hermione. Hermione looked at the furry creature as it grabbed Luna's hand as she tried to sit and pulled it back to its chin, prompting for more scratching.

"Thank you, but I'd much rather sit, if that's alright with you?" She asked as she did so. Harry cocked his head to the side and appeared to think for a moment as Hermione blinked at the girl in confusion.

"Yes, I suppose that would be more comfortable, wouldn't it?" He asked, making Hermione's head turn to face him so quickly her hair flew across her face. Harry ignored it, even though he found it amusing that Luna took his comment as stealing the bench, making a joke out of it, and pointed to Luna and then Hermione in turn. "Hermione, this is Luna Lovegood. Luna, this is Hermione Granger."

Hermione reached across the table and shook the blonde's hand, even as the fur person mewed pathetically for attention. "Hello. You're a second year, right?" She asked, remembering what Harry had told her the night before and wanting to break the ice.

"Yes," Luna said as she put eggs and bacon on her plate to form a smiley face with one hand and idly scratched behind the furry's ear with the other. "I was sorted with Ginny and used to play with her and Ronald, though he never liked playing with us too much, I don't believe. He much preferred to fly about."

Hermione nodded her head and grimaced slightly. "Yes, he does prefer flying to much else, doesn't he?" She asked needlessly. They lapsed into a short silence as they ate slowly before Hermione could

not hold in her questions any longer. "Why are you holding that thing like that?"

"Fuzzy? I caught him trying to drag all of the second year girls' under things out in a giant sack out of our dorm room and decided he was cute. He's been quite agreeable so far," Luna said, feeding the tiny creature a piece of bacon as it imitated playing Peek-a-Boo to appear cuter. She did not feel it was worth mentioning that he had three friends who managed to finish the job.

Hermione turned to face Harry with an accusatory glare. "All of your underthings, huh?" Harry pulled at his collar and coughed as his throat suddenly felt thick.

"Oh no," Luna said with wide eyes. "He only tried to take everyone else's. Mine were still where they belonged."

"Why would he do that," Hermione asked both Luna and Harry, though directed more at Harry.

"A small step to setting things to rights, mostly," he said after swallowing a sausage. Hermione understood the unspoken comment that it was against those who treated the younger girl badly and not just random. She glanced at Luna and pondered her own thoughts and feelings as she watched the blonde smile and feed Fuzzy. Just as Hermione was about to comment, Ron sat down heavily on the bench next to her and grabbed for the food with a mumbled 'hello'.

"And a bright and cheery good morning to you, too, Ron," Harry said cheerfully, though putting the happiness on a little thick.

"Good morning, Ronald," Luna said airily.

"Yea, morning." Ron ignored the others, even the furry creature in Luna's arms, and continued to eat, still miffed about being anywhere near 'Loony Lovegood'.

The four sat and spoke of trivial matters for several minutes until four of Harry's creations came running into the hall as if death were on their heels. Stopping just a few feet inside the room, they searched for Harry and quickly shot out after him.



"Quick! Take these!" The smallest of the group said out loud, its voice high and frightened. "They're after us!"

"What?" Harry asked confusedly. "Who's after you? Why are you running?"

"Devils!" The creature hissed, laying its ears back while the others around him, including the one that just hopped out of Luna's arms, did the same and prepared to run. "Death on swift legs! Creatures of the darkest nights! They're after us! Take the damned bag already!"

Up at the staff table, the teachers were listening with growing fear as the creatures spoke in the almost deathly silent room. They had no idea what the little creatures were, either, but they had not yet harmed anyone and there were more than enough to cause plenty of harm and damage if angered, so it was best to let them coexist temporarily. But if something were coming into the school that had them terrified...

"Too late!" The creature yelled out as all five of the Thundercats looked at the door where no audible noise had come from. "They're here!" Immediately, each creature took off towards the large, double doors as a small gaggle of cats rushed in from the side entrance where the doomsayer and his partners in crime had rushed in from. Each of the cats had Harry's new creations in sight and picked up noticeable speed as they tried to run from the carnivorous felines.

As Fuzzy and the four newcomers exited the hall, Luna deftly flicked her wand and a Slytherin first year accidentally spilled a pitcher of pumpkin juice in front of the mewling cats, who were suddenly more focused on staying dry than catching their prey.

"Where in the world would thirty cats have come from?" Hermione asked as she tried to spot her own cat in the herd. It wouldn't do to have him spending time with such ruffians!

"They aren't real," Luna stated. "They're conjured."

"How can you tell?" Hermione asked as she turned to the second year.

"They feel like the Headmaster's magic and too strongly to have just been compelled," she said as she turned to Harry. "What was in the little bag?"

Harry shrugged and opened the cloth bag to find Dumbledore's prized lemon drops. His eyes widened as Luna snickered. Quickly, he looked around to see that the majority of the students were still paying attention to the cats or had gone back to eating. Not wanting to get caught with the spoils of his creations' apparent theft, though he would later claim prank, Harry tied the bag closed and set it on the table in front of Ron, where it was sure to disappear. Oddly enough, the boy still had not asked what the little fur people were or where they had come from.

"That won't turn out well," he told them with amusement as the Headmaster came into the room, looking about for his bag as he followed his cats in the direction of double doors. He saw his cats, but none of the smaller ... cat things ... or his baggie of sweets. Frowning, the old man sat down.

"Harry," Hermione hissed. "You've got to give them back to-" she stopped abruptly as she realized the bag of candy was already gone, and Ron's mouth was stuffed and clacking as he looked rightfully pleased with himself. "Weren't there more than a handful of candies still in that?" She whispered to Harry.

"Yea," he whispered back, but loudly enough for Luna to hear. "But Ron loves candy. He doesn't care where it came from. It's why he always falls prey to the twins' joke candies." He smiled at Hermione as she tried to figure out why Ron was so silent, and had apparently gone for candy that he knew came from a questionable source, and why this promised to be a year to top the other two.

Dumbledore stepped up on stage and to his podium, deciding to head off all the questions he could.

"If I could have all of your attention, please. Thank you. As I am sure many of you have noticed, Hogwarts seems to now be playing home to yet another new group. I cannot say that they are good or bad, but please do nothing to antagonize them. There are a good number of them and we do not need any unfortunate accidents."

"I have spoken with our new Care of Magical Creatures professor, Professor Hagrid, and he has never before seen their like," he said, not seeing a reproving look from Hermione to Harry, or Harry's hand carefully point towards the ceiling. "So please do nothing that can-"

He was cut off by a dark and sinister laughter, coming from the charmed ceiling as the lights dimmed and light from the windows lessened. Where normally, it showed the sky outside, it now showed dark thunderclouds and lightning, with two glowing, green eyes staring down at the suddenly worried children below.

"Hahaha! Do not fret, little children. The Thundercats will not harm you. My pets will merely roam the halls, looking for those who are a blight upon humanity and all that it stands for," the voice said, its eyes looking as though it were smiling.

"Do not anger the tiny warriors, for they are great in number and strength," the voice taunted, chuckling again. "Be prepared, Hogwarts. The spirit of the Marauders has returned! Meet the newest member, Bolt!" As the voice called his name for all to hear, thunder clapped loudly, the charmed ceiling flashed brilliantly, and then the whole thing was back to normal, appearing almost as if nothing had happened.

"Potter!" Snape bellowed out as he stalked towards where Harry was sitting. A tiny first year saw his face twisted by rage and nearly wet himself.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked innocently.

"What do you think you're playing at!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Professor," Harry said as the majority of the school watched on and Dumbledore was looking at the ceiling with a twinkle in his eye.

Both the twins and Lupin looked as though Christmas had come early. Very early, stacked with several birthdays and shares of Zonko's on top.

"The ceiling, Potter!" Snape snarled. "Don't think I don't know it wasn't you!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Professor. Whoever that mad genius was, I'm sure he's hidden his tracks exceedingly well," Harry said with a sickeningly sweet voice. "I do hope you catch that vandal and let him know activities like that will not be accepted!"

One of the twins, Harry was not sure which, fell backwards from his seat and the other was biting down on a biscuit to keep from laughing. He would have to remember to get the Marauder's map from them, later.

"Potter! I'll see you expelled for this!" Snape hissed out dangerously.

"Thank you for the compliment, sir. I'm not sure I could have pulled something like this off, but you give me something to shoot for."

Harry watched in amusement as Snape's face began shifting through colors as McGonagall came up and rested her hand on his shoulder, her eyes suspiciously bright.

"I'm sure we can perform an investigation into this, Severus. Let's eat our breakfast."

"It was him, I know it was!" He said as he was led back to the table. Harry caught Lupin's eye and winked.

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[Author's Note:] -

I do know the Thundercats came from Thundara (though it may have been spelled differently.) But doubt Harry would have remembered. Either way, I am willing to take another name for them, but have another reason for using this, so won't be taking different names unless you come up with a really good one.

## Chapter7 – Because We're Friends

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
\$Parsletongue\$

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Hermione's Schedule: To be sure it's clear, I'm stating that Runes do not coincide with any other classes. The HP Lexicon is how I decided to verify my schedule facts, and it proves that Rowling either was an idiot for scheduling so many electives at the same time so that you were forced into taking only some and not others (particularly Ravenclaws who may wish to take Runes, Arithmancy, Care or others and is unable due to stupid scheduling. Electives can't be during core classes, after all, and they don't take each class every day,) or she just wanted so many things to happen all at once that it was required. A bit weak to have everything seem to happen all at the same time, but somewhat necessary when you consider each book basically spanned a year's worth of action and time. I still dislike it. Therefore, Ancient Runes isn't tied to anything else. Hermione needed her time turner because five of her classes shared the same day, three of them all at once. And regardless of what happened in the books, Astronomy is on Friday or Saturday nights so the students aren't up at all hours and tired for their next day's classes.

Quicksilver: An older name for mercury, the liquid that's put in thermometers, poisonous fumes and highly toxic. It also beads and has a higher surface tension than water, but acts much the same, but will try to bond with itself into one mass.

Highly Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Partially Kissed Hero" by Perfect Lionheart (H/Hr/L/S Bones/H Abbot – Possibly going harem, but currently acknowledged as only H/Hr/L/Su/Han. Susan/Hannah come into the fray around chapter 50-ish, and haven't really become a major player yet, but give him time. The author's a bloody genius.)

xXx Previously xXx

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[edit]

"I don't know what you're talking about, Professor [Snape]. Whoever that mad genius was, I'm sure he's hidden his tracks exceedingly well," Harry said with a sickeningly sweet voice. "I do hope you catch that vandal and let him know activities like that will not be accepted!"

[edit]

"It was him, I know it was!" He [Snape] said as he was led back to the table. Harry caught Lupin's eye and winked.

xXx Story xXx

"I don't know how you did it," Hermione said as the majority of the students began to chatter excitedly amongst themselves about the spectacle they had just witnessed, and the Weasley twins looked to be ready to start a cult following, "but if you get caught for this, I'm going to ask to supervise as Filch forces you to clean the toilets with your toothbrush."

Luna giggled as she cut into a pancake, causing Hermione to cast a pointed glare, before speaking amusedly. "As Harry said, I'm sure that 'mad genius' was clever enough to cover his tracks. It may even have been these 'Thundercats' as well. They do seem like mischievous little things."

Harry grinned brightly at the Ravenclaw and quickly finished the last bite of his breakfast before wrapping a handful of bacon in several napkins and putting them in his pocket. "Good luck with Divination, Mate. I hear Professor Trelawney predicts a student's death every

year. Maybe sit in the back?" Harry suggested to Ron with a smile and making sure not to bring any attention to the fact that he was headed to Arithmancy where he shared the class with Hermione, who was going to end up being in Divination with Ron.

Ron grimaced and shuddered lightly. "Easy for you to say. You won't be there," he said, sounding almost accusing as he tucked into his eggs.

"Oh, honestly! Professor McGonagall says no one has actually died even though she's been predicting deaths left and right for fifteen years!" Hermione huffed. "You would think Dumbledore would realize that and get rid of the woman."

Harry nodded, letting Hermione rant and handed Luna a galleon. "That's to cover the subscription for however long it will last for. When can I expect the first edition?" Harry asked, referring to his request for The Quibbler he had told her about the night before.

Luna pocketed the galleon with a nod. "I'll owl Daddy and you'll have the weekly subscription for two years with this."

"Alright, thanks. See you at lunch then, yea?" He asked, ignoring Ron's dismayed expression as Luna agreed after a moment's thought. "Excellent. See you then and see you two," he said, looking at Hermione and Ron, "in Transfiguration. I've gotta make a quick stop."

Absolutely curious and not about to let Harry out of her sight, Hermione gathered her books and got up. "Want some company? I'm done and still have questions about these 'Thundercats'," she told him accusingly.

Hermione felt it was her duty to do what she could to protect Harry, and figuring out what he was planning was key to that. Most people saw it as being bossy and overbearing, and while she would admit that it was partly true, at least, it was also because Ron and Harry were the only ones who were ever willing to stand by her. Even after Ron said horrible things about her, Harry had come for her when he knew a large, dangerous troll was loose and that she was alone and unknowing in the loo. He came for her. Protected her. Saved her! She knew about life debts. McGonagall had told her about them, knowing magic would enforce her to obey him at some point if it

deemed something he told her as valid, forcing her to equalize the balance between what he had done for her and what she could do for him.

She didn't really care. Hermione knew that, for as long as Harry was her friend, there was little she wouldn't do for him. She had already followed his unlucky butt through rather dangerous situations. But she was going to make damned sure no one could take him away from her! Snape, Dumbledore, magic and little bitty fur people be damned!

"Sure. I'm just going to keep my promise to Fawkes," Harry said with a careless shrug.

The two left Ron to continue eating, as he had arrived later than they had and generally ate more than them, and left the Great Hall together, not seeing Snape seethe as he compared Harry's antics to his father's or the curious expressions of Remus and Dumbledore.

Once out of the Great Hall and into the next series of hallways, Hermione finally had enough of Harry's silence and sighed. "Alright. You win," she said, amusedly. "They're cute, I'll give you that. But why are they really here? You aren't the pranking type."

Harry smiled at her and gave her a quick hug with his left arm that he held around her shoulders and his right swept the air in front of them grandly. "Ah! But that's where you're wrong, my sweet Hermione," he said, playing the part of the loquacious protagonist and missing the girl's blush at his name. "My father, my godfather and my sort-of-an-uncle were all pranksters, so it's in my blood, my god-blood and my sort-of-an-uncle blood," he said magnanimously. "Quite the reputation to uphold."

"But, you're right," he said, taking a slightly more serious air. "They aren't just for pranking. I have roughly a hundred of the guys running around the school to act as scouts and informants."

"What?" Hermione asked, sounding as surprised as she looked. "What on earth for?"

"Well, think about it. In first year, we had a teacher that roamed the halls at night and ran into the Forbidden Forest to kill unicorns and searching for the Stone without being suspected or caught by



anyone but Snape and McGonagall wouldn't believe us when we tried to warn her and basically told us to shut up and stay quiet, thus leaving the Stone without any additional guards or defenses," he said as he guided her around the next corner with his arm still around her shoulders.

"In second year, we had the basilisk that roamed the halls freely when simple monitoring charms could have alerted Dumbledore to its presence, not to mention the portraits that will report anything to him, that fop Lockhart who did more harm than good any time he pulled out his wand and a possessed student running around, writing in blood on the walls. And then this year we have dementors and an escaped convict, the first of which guard Azkaban because they not only kill anything they're allowed to, but because their mere presence makes those same inmates, the worst of the wizarding world, suffer just by being anywhere near them and they are now massing around this school, full of children, many of whom have very fragile and developing minds still."

"I suppose that makes sense," Hermione replied almost immediately. When the hell had Harry learned to make sense? "And this is supposed to be one of the safest places in all of Britain, but we've been in life-threatening danger each year, so far. And more than once each time."

"Exactly," Harry agreed with a soft smile. "We don't know much of anything about this new Defense teacher," Harry said, feeling like he was lying even though they technically did not. Only he knew anything, not both. "We don't know what the students might be up to, or the faculty or the monsters the Ministry thought to be a smart idea to put in a school full of children. I wanted a little back-up," he told her honestly. While the bits about Remus and Sirius were not exactly true, they were not lies, either. He did want to be able to keep an eye on them and maybe help them, particularly Sirius, out, without being seen.

"And the one that tried to take the Ravenclaws' knickers?" She asked, an accusatory tone and glint in her eye. She was glad Harry was growing up, but was rather displeased with the idea of him turning into a raging pervert.

Or a cross-dresser.

Harry scoffed and rolled his eyes as they neared the gargoyle, removing his arm from around her. "They deserve it. Luna's a good person and has been teased like we were in primary school," he said unthinkingly.

Hermione did not stop or slow, and in fact, did not make any outward change in appearance. Inside, however, she felt a sudden shock of fear, doubt and hurt. While she and Harry had not really spoken much about their lives before Hogwarts, he had hinted with unrealized slips and comments that he had suffered greatly in his time before magic. She, however, had taken great pains not to mention anything about her life up to that point that held any risk of such admissions. Her friends had never asked and she had never told.

She had not even spoken about her parents beyond basic information until Harry had met them and learned about them himself, not even their names. That Harry would automatically assume that she had been so alone, or worse, if she had been that easily read with all of the careful steps taken to try and hide her previous life, was quite scary.

She didn't realize that he was speaking from conversations the two shared while they were alone in the tent for three months after Ron left them during the Horcrux hunt. They had spent a lot of time during the winter months hiding out in their tent and huddling together in each others' beds for warmth, sharing more together than they had ever before.

Then she frowned as she realized Harry was not paying attention to what he said and actually thought about it. If Luna were truly that alone, and being treated so poorly in her own house, then she could try to get to know the girl, first and foremost, and then make her judgments. "How do you know the Thundercats won't just start picking on students?" She asked, deciding to work out how he knew about her pre-Hogwarts life later.

"Because I made them specifically to the effect of being very respectful and honorable creatures," he said simply. "But just like real people, if you don't offer that to them, then they will set for retribution, but nothing dangerous. Just pranks and tricks, for the most part."

He refused to look her in the eye.

"Then why steal knickers?" She asked again. "That isn't a prank or trick and I doubt you want them for yourself." She still eyed him speculatively, just as she considered it while confirming her suspicions that he really didn't want them for himself. He had changed a lot over the summer. But her doubt was only momentary. Give or take.

Harry smiled at her for a moment before looking forward again. "They steal her things, forcing her to dress in outlandish outfits and sometimes wear two left or right shoes at the same time. I know what that can do to a person's feet, especially in the long term. It isn't funny, it's cruel. They take her pillows and I think I recall hearing about itching powder in her sheets and knickers once," he said with a scowl, not mentioning that this was something he and Luna had shared during his original fifth year. He actually missed those open-hearted discussions with the blonde. They had meant a lot to him and he knew it was much the same for her as well.

"Then why doesn't she tell Professor Flitwick?" Hermione asked, shocked that it was really that bad. Sleeping in itching powder throughout the whole night would cause rashes and burns all over her skin, causing the simple act of wearing clothing to be painful! Not to mention the boils it would cause from chemical burns! That a girl could quietly deal with all of that and possibly worse was a horrible thought. "Surely he would do something about it!"

"You remember how that worked in primary school. What can he really do?" Harry countered. "Monitoring charms? Illegal in dorms, especially controversial in a female's dorm room. Have people look out for her? That both draws attention to the problem and there's no way to know who to really trust to help and could cause resentment in both Luna and whoever is playing the older sibling role. Search everyone's things?" Harry snorted. "That would only mean worse retribution and only a moron would keep stolen things in their own stuff; it's hard to deny knowledge of it at that point." Remembering his fifth year and how Luna had said they always showed up when needed, he cursed the Ravensclaws mentally. "And they're in a house created for their intelligence. Likely as not, they already have plans on what to say and do if any of them should be caught. You don't do stupid things without an alibi. Bad Guys and Villainy 101, you know."

"I suppose you're right," Hermione growled out, knowing he was right and ignoring any references to classes on how to be a proper villain. "That's exactly how bullies operate." Unbidden, Hermione had a multitude of flashbacks to her own days in primary school, but she knew it was nothing like living with your tormentors. Even Malfoy was not as bad as some of the girls who tormented her in primary school.

"Regardless," he finished as they came to the stone gargoyle, "I know how to help her. It means going into the spotlight a bit, but I've decided that someone needs to step up in this damned place. If the teachers can let Snape give false detentions, take points wrongfully and let people like Malfoy abuse others right in the Great Hall in front of everyone, then they will have to change," he finished ominously, the tone of his voice sending shivers down her spine. Whether it was in worry or awe, she was not sure. But the Harry that was on the train was back for that brief moment.

"Do you know the password? We left Dumbledore in the Great Hall," Hermione suddenly realized she had no clue how they were supposed to get in.

Harry smiled at her with one side of his mouth as he looked the gargoyle in the eye. He had taken the subtle advice of the goblins and looked into the rights of ownership to their school. He owned it, and everything that was deemed as property of the school, which was everything that didn't belong to the students and faculty. Anything confiscated, the library, the hidden vaults below, it was all his. Even things left 'to the Headmaster of Hogwarts' were officially his. It was amazing how specific you had to be in magical contracts and oaths.

The original Founders had given the Ministry the right to oversee the school near the end of their lives to keep the school focused on aiming for certain standards, which was what had prompted the creation of the Board of Governors. They were meant as an advisory board to assist the Headmaster, but the school had always remained 'in the family', so to speak, with the lines of each Founder able to work together to have absolute authority regardless of what the Ministry said or did. Unlike schools in the muggle world, Hogwarts had been a collaboration of ideas between her four creators and people went there to learn in a safe environment that

continued, but had never actually become a part of the government. Just like in the Middle Ages, everything was actually owned by those who built the structure. And its defenses kept anyone from taking it by force. The castle was a Ravenclaw relic that had been added upon and built upon by the Dwarves, Centaurs and other magical creatures who were being granted permanent residency in the protected realm of the Forbidden Forest. The Ministry would have attempted to gain control, but there was nothing they could legally do and they had long-since lost view of what power they really had over the castle. That was why they had the High Inquisitor position. It had originally been created as a liaison position since it didn't have any true authority within the castle's outside walls.

In exchange for assistance to learn from masters of their crafts and protection of their Forest in hunts to destroy any dark creatures that existed within their home, the magical creatures had a standing agreement to protect any wandering students who found their way inside and escort them back to the castle. They would also be free of any form of control from the outside. Reneging on that deal is why the Centaurs disliked the humans so thoroughly.

For a group of four people whose children had grown and who had passed the point of childbearing years, the castle and the small world around it had become their baby, being set up and nurtured to protect it and make it as capable of working in the future as any parents attempted to do for their children. That's why the castle was sentient and why there were such incredible wards surrounding it. To protect it from those who would steal its virtue, so to speak, or would wish her harm.

But Harry was considered the castle's only remaining parent. Let that bitch Umbridge try her educational decrees in fifth year again. He would show her exactly what happened. Still, every child was taught to obey their parent's orders.

"Hello. Will you open, please?" Harry asked, having read that the gargoyle was meant to keep out those who weren't authorized in the control-center of the school's wards. Harry was, of course.

A moment's hesitation later, the gargoyle slid to the side to Hermione's surprise. She followed him up the stairs as she pondered his words, wondering why Harry was so different. He had never been so devoted before, or so outspoken. Last year, he would

have been perfectly content to just stand in the shadows and be out of everyone's way. Now he wanted to go around protecting some new girl that he apparently knew in some way that he would not explain and wanted to suddenly seem to rule the school! If he didn't make so much sense, and wasn't obviously right, she would have been worried.

As they entered Dumbledore's office, she suddenly stopped thinking as she saw Harry walk up to the most gorgeous bird she had ever seen. Its red plumage practically glowed it was so vibrant. His gold eyes, she realized, actually were glowing and she could feel the purity of the creature as it gazed at them curiously. While this was the same bird she had seen before, it seemed to have come into its own between now and when it had brought those letters from Dumbledore and McGonagall during the summer.

"Hello, Fawkes. This is Hermione Granger. Hermione, this is Fawkes, the phoenix that chose Dumbledore as a companion in life. Sorry I didn't introduce you properly before. I hadn't really thought about it at the time with the letter and all," Harry said while indicating both other living creatures in the room before pulling out a polished bronze box from his pocket that he enlarged on Dumbledore's desk.

"Hello," Hermione said with a tentative wave as Fawkes trilled lightly back at her in greeting, amused at the girl's actions. She would have loved to have petted the fiery bird, but he seemed larger and somehow more intimidating this time around. She definitely had not felt that kind of power coming from him in Harry's library wing. Hermione had not realized the phoenix was a month out of his burning day when she saw him during the summer.

"It took me a little reading, but I found out that, even though you're an elemental creature of fire, you absolutely adore frozen foods."

Fawkes visibly straightened and Hermione could have sworn his feathers truly began to glow.

"Now," Harry said, pulling out a handful of fruits, "I know I promised you plums, but I decided to bring some peaches, strawberries, blueberries and apricots as well after reading a few books about phoenixes. Is that okay?"

Fawkes trilled loudly and crooned over the box that had been magically expanded on the inside and charmed to keep anything within it fresh and ice cold. With an oddly graceful fall, that Harry thought was supposed to be a headfirst dive, Fawkes began eating the frozen treats rapidly.

"You know," a voice came from behind the duo, causing both to turn and look at Dumbledore's shocked face. "I never really thought he was such a glutton." Mentally, he was questioning how they had entered his office.

Harry smiled and pointed at the visible tail feathers; all that was sticking out of the bronze chest. "I promised him some plums if he helped me out, and I was curious if he would like them or other fruits more."

Dumbledore watched in morbid fascination as the tail feathers seemed to simply lower themselves slowly as Fawkes ate his way down, chasing an errant apricot. It appeared far more savage from the outside, however. "I see. I don't suppose you could tell me how you managed to get inside of my office when I had not given you the password? The wards on the door alerted me to someone entering even while the castle failed to report your passage." Dumbledore looked at both teens as Hermione paled drastically and Harry shrugged.

"I just asked the gargoyle to let us in, Headmaster," Harry said distractedly before turning to face the older man. "Anyway, feel free to keep the box until Fawkes has had his fill. I had the same number of each fruit in there and it's charmed to tell me what was taken first so I know better next time. If you'll excuse us, though, we need to head to class or we'll be late." He motioned Hermione through the door with a wave of his hand as he held it open for her and followed her out before giving the headmaster a chance to stop him and ask further questions.

Dumbledore sat behind his desk several moments after the kids had left his office and sighed heavily. Something was very much off about young Mister Potter. The way he carried himself, spoke and interacted with both himself, his peers and the whisperings he had heard over the summer about a few meetings held with the goblins all raised flags in the headmaster's mind. Harry Potter, not but three months ago, had been a shy, introverted boy who was practically

terrified of being noticed, much less taking any form of control over a situation that was not immediately dire.

Even more, the school had allowed the boy unrestricted access to his office and had not even warned him! If it weren't for his own wards placed on the doorway to let him know who was on the other side of the door, he would not have known anyone was there. There were items within that office that would have horrendous results should the boy have handled them improperly. A few of them, Harry would have been lucky for a quick death. Being a school, students brought in all manner of items, some as dark as you could get. All of those items were stored in a room that was connected to his office, labeled and organized both for the repository of magical knowledge and history the school stood for, and because he was quite terrified about those items ending up in the wrong hands, even at the Ministry. Or just simply being sold on the black market. It was also a magically-binding requirement from faculty that any confiscated items be sent to a vault-like area accessible from only the Headmaster's office if they were not to be returned to the student.

That the school allowed him entrance and failed to warn him meant that either Harry Potter had forced his way in using a method that was both fast and discrete enough that Miss Granger failed to notice, and therefore almost impossible, or the school allowed it. And that thought was even more terrifying for the old man.

The school would do so again, if that were the case.

Frowning at the smacking and burping sounds coming from the bronze chest on his desk, Dumbledore made a note to himself to store and lock his valuable items, hiding them from plain sight. Harry Potter could not be allowed to grow outside of his power to control.

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Harry practically quivered in his seat next to Hermione as the majority of the tiny class, mostly Ravenclaws and a few Hufflepuffs, filed into the room. This was Ancient Runes, a class he had not taken his last time through the timeline, or any other that he was aware of, and one of two classes he would have in which he was not already familiar with the topics being covered.



Beside him, Hermione quirked an eyebrow as she observed her friend, amused as he looked around disapprovingly for their not-even-tardy teacher. This was an interesting and amusing change in him. Especially while she was the calm and collected one. Harry had quills and parchment out, books open, his runes etching kit being touched every few seconds in anticipation and looked ready to track their teacher down if she did not show up within moments.

"Harry, calm down. You're making me jittery just by being near you," she said without hiding her amusement.

Harry blushed and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Hermione. It's just that I've been reading about this all summer and am really looking forward to it. I mean, runes have been used longer than wands and you can do a lot more with them! If you make seal arrays with them, then they become far more than plain symbols like an alphabet or something! You can make those to do an entire, complicated ritual just by writing everything out or make a bunch of things happen all at once!"

Hermione laughed and put her hand on Harry's shoulder, trying to get him to sit still as a voice spoke up behind him. "You're quite right, Mister Potter. But seals and seal arrays of that complexity are all covered beyond OWL level studies. You are not likely to be working on those too soon, and I don't want to see you doing so in my classroom, either."

"Good evening, class," the relatively young woman said, walking to the front and standing by her desk. "I am Bathsheba Babbling. I'll be your Ancient Runes instructor and we'll be working on runes and runic histories in this class."

The professor touched her wand upon a rune on her desk, attached to a seal array just as Harry had mentioned, and a disillusionment charm faded away from several items hidden in the corner that the students had not approached in thanks to a disinterest ward, also written in runes. "These are a sampling of items that runes are used for. We have glow spheres with simple light-emitting runes with an on-off variable structure, plumbing fixtures that conjure water or remove wastes with waste baskets that have the same runes as you find in your loo and protection runes that guard against fire, water, breakage and a whole host of other things."

Hermione smiled at the utility of the new subject and took a glance at Harry, who's quill was scribbling furiously as it automatically kept pace with the professor's speech and mentally noted to get her own auto-notes quill after borrowing Harry's dictated notes to be perfectly thorough. Interestingly, he was already making notes of various ideas and questions on another parchment. 'I guess he really is into this class.'

"Runes are a subject that is as useful and beneficial as the person using them is capable of. Anything you can envision, you can use runes for, if you know how to write them out." Professor Babbling went on to explain how runes could do anything that could be done with a wand, but without as many restrictions. There were fewer laws against them, as well, as they could be used on their homes to protect against fires or breaking windows and even as third year students, they were allowed to add them, with their parents' permission of course. Magical households even used runic cushioning charms on things with harsh edges to protect the soft heads of waddling toddlers and clumsy people who may accidentally drop them. The Marauders even made a pact to never let Lily know they had dropped Harry once. Or twice. It was hard getting them to talk about it, but they all looked extremely guilty whenever it came up. But because of those same cushioning charms, held in place by Runes, she was never the wiser.

They could even be written in such a way as to be timed so that an entire ritual could be programmed into runes, or the majority of one so that the person or persons could do other parts for themselves. That was why so many rituals used to empower their bodies or give themselves additional abilities had runic diagrams written all over the floor on the more complicated rituals; they helped like nothing you could believe. They took dozens or even a hundred steps and turned them into only a few, easy-to-do ones. It was also why every enhancement ritual required those runes and runic diagrams, to be fully precise and perfect in their creations.

Harry fell in love.

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"You are only delaying the inevitable," Snape said smarmily, his oily voice quiet as he watched carefully for Harry to make some kind of action for a detention during the lunch time feast. "Soon, you will be

in my dungeon, and I'll have you cleaning chamber pots instead of cauldrons." Feeling something suddenly off, Snape's eyes flickered to his left where Flitwick was watching him with a look of shock plastered over his face.

"You're a few bubbles short of a potion, aren't you?" Flitwick asked.

"He is his father's son," Snape defended himself. "This morning just proves that he is soon to follow in his father's footsteps," Snape narrowed his eyes as Potter caused the Lovegood girl and Granger to laugh. "He'll screw up soon."

Meanwhile, Harry, Hermione, Ron and Luna were sitting at the table, Ron and Harry talking about the upcoming Quidditch teams and try-outs while Hermione talked with Luna, learning more about the quirky blonde. She had already learned that Harry only spoke to her for the first time the day before, so she was rather curious to find out how much of what he knew and told her was accurate, trying to be delicate enough not to mention the bad stuff in the off chance that it was correct.

Hermione found it odd that the girl corroborated Harry's story as far as she was willing to admit to, but that Harry had explained a lot more than she was getting out of Luna. That meant that Harry had learned either in some way other than by Luna, or that Luna lied and had actually known Harry longer than since just the day before.

That wasn't too likely, as she was with Harry almost anywhere he was at. Granted, there was all of the time she was petrified, but Ron had been with him and seemed shocked and dismayed that Harry knew her. That meant he either hadn't met her the year before or had chosen to hide the friendship from the redhead.

That was as likely as Harry turning dark.

Speaking of her intriguing friend, she glanced over to where he was sitting to see a blank spot and Ron looking behind her. Confused that Harry got past her, he was apparently getting sneakier, she looked around and saw him approaching Professor Flitwick as Professor Snape was leaving the Great Hall.

She watched the two converse for a few moments and eventually both nodded before Harry came back to sit down. Frowning,

Hermione asked, "what did you want to speak to Professor Flitwick about?" She was beginning to worry about not knowing what Harry was planning before he took action. She had been rather upset over the summer because he was doing things without consulting anyone. Some of the things he was doing was worrisome. He could easily overstep the line and do something dangerous, foolish or risky just because he wasn't paying attention.

Hermione was worried and scared for her friend. And he wasn't allowing her to help him.

"I was talking with Professor Flitwick to get a conversation with him just before dinner so we can discuss him sponsoring the dueling club where I can teach the Patronus to you guys and whoever wants to join so that as many people can learn it as possible. I figure, since the dementors are surrounding the school, then giving anyone the chance to defend themselves is probably good. And I know just about anyone can do it if they try."

With a non-Hermione-like squee, Hermione wrapped Harry in a tight hug. "Oh! That'll be wonderful! You're one of the best at Defense and it could even promote house unity!"

"Sod unity!" Ron scoffed. "Harry wouldn't teach any Slytherins just so they could come back later to hex us in the back!"

"I'll teach whoever shows up as long as they aren't disruptive," Harry replied, wondering if he shared the same view at that point in time as Ron showed. Somehow, he thought he did. "Dementors will kill anyone. While I don't expect anyone to have to worry, it's still too risky to just let students run around freely without being able to protect themselves. They'll be good or I'll kick their butts out, but this isn't about house affiliation."

Hermione smiled brilliantly while Ron shook his head in disgust. "You can't trust Slytherins, Harry. They'll hex you in the back as soon as you turn around. I bet Malfoy would come just so he could learn what you know and then use it against you."

Harry rolled his eyes. Malfoy had become rather bad, he would admit, leading Death Eaters into the school so they could kill and enslave the students in his sixth year, but when it came to actually killing Dumbledore, he had choked and Snape had been forced to

do the actual deed. Right now, he was nothing more than an annoying little brat.

"He isn't known to be a model student, Ron," Harry said with a suffering sigh. "But, it isn't as if I'll be teaching everyone how to be excellent duelers, just some practical stuff."

Luna scratched one of Harry's Thundercats below the bench where it had attached itself to her leg in hopes of table scraps as she turned to Ron. "It isn't as though all Slytherins are evil. That is like saying all Hufflepuffs are loyal and hardworking, but Lockhart was a Hufflepuff, and he was loyal to no one but himself and certainly didn't work hard at anything. And not all Gryffindors are good, or Sirius Black would not have been evil enough to betray Harry's parents."

Luna's eyes shot over to Harry, trying to judge his reaction. Thus far, they had been ... odd, to say the least. He winced any time something bad was mentioned about Sirius Black, he occasionally glared at Scabbers and his life force was still becoming more ... more than he had been the year before. She wasn't sure what it was, but something beyond natural had happened to Harry Potter, and she was trying to figure out the puzzle. She wanted to trust in him, desperately and with everything she was, she wanted to believe him to be her friend. But everyone had always only been her friend so they could make fun of her or lead her into something.

She learned not to trust the people who tried before Christmas of her first year.

Even now, mentioning how Sirius betrayed his family, Harry winced and seemed upset by hearing it, but she was only talking about what everyone knew. And they had talked about Sirius before, so it wasn't that it was a taboo subject, so she knew she would not alienate him by bringing it up.

"Everyone's got a bad seed," Ron waved off Luna's comment, trying to ignore her presence.

"Regardless," Harry said, his voice becoming a little firmer to show he was tired of the subject, "I'll teach the charm to anyone who wants to learn it. Why don't you see about a Quidditch club? Maybe even get pickup games every now and then," Harry suggested,

trying to give Ron something to do so he wouldn't feel left out of everything. Simply put, he wouldn't help Harry in any way with planning the club and would only be a hindrance, trying to tell Harry to not allow the Slytherins.

"That's a great idea!" Ron said, looking invigorated. "I'll talk to McGonagall about it later, after I've got some ideas for her!"

Hermione nodded, thinking furiously. "You could ask about making one night a week devoted to each house, with the fifth for the houses to change out and each weekend could be filled with half days on the pitch for each team, letting each one get all the practice they wanted while playing against those who aren't on a team so they get practice, but the rival teams don't get to watch all the newest moves."

Ron shook his head, wondering how Hermione could think so simply. "Nah. We'll just take the weekends that games aren't being played on, or maybe Fridays, or ... Hmm." He trailed off as he began to think things through, continuously changing and discarding plans.

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Harry arrived a few minutes later to Care of Magical Creatures than he had the previous time he remembered and saw Neville's book leap from his hands and start trying to chase the boy across the field. With a smile and a silent stunner, the book fell silent while the majority of the other students laughed.

"Thanks Harry," Neville said in relief. "That's the second time it's tried to get me today."

"Not a problem, Neville. Just stroke the spine before you unlatch it and that'll calm it down," Harry said, looking around for the hippogriff that had been nice enough to listen to him vent after his godfather died in the previous timeline.

"Ello students!" Hagrid called out, leading a feathered horse into clearing. "T'day, we'll be learnin' about hippogriffs! This one's name is 'Buckbeak'."

Several students backed away from the large creature and took in its horse-shaped body, taloned feet, bird-like head and large,

feathery wings with a good dose of fear. Harry was the only one who was close that stayed where he was, with Hermione having come back next to him after gaining some confidence from the bespectacled boy.

Though she made a point to keep him between her and the hippogriff.

"Now, hippogriffs are very special creatures," Hagrid said. "They're very noble and dignified and won't take any disrespect. If they feel you aren't showin' 'em the proper respect, they'll get powerful angry and show you they're place above you, jus' like they do fer any other animal in the wild."

Hagrid smiled brightly at the students, most of whom had taken another step back at the large professor's warning. "Now! Who'd like ta ride 'im?"

Stepping forward, Harry followed Hagrid's advice and bowed to the large creature after getting to a respectable distance. After a moment's observation, the creature bowed back and Harry stepped up to him, petting him on the head and scratching in a way he knew Buckbeak enjoyed. "Hello. May I fly with you?" He asked, getting a quick nod from the hippogriff who decided he liked the human and his scratchy fingers.

With a grin that most would say wasn't reserved for the sane, Harry jumped up and maneuvered so Buckbeak could get under him really fast before Hagrid had a chance to help him up and then the horse-like creature took a running start and leapt into the air.

The bushy-haired one was not amused. "HARRY JAMES POTTER!"

Minutes later, Harry slid off of the winged beast, giggling like a school girl. He had forgotten how incredible it was to ride on Buckbeak. Like the Thestrals from his fifth year, there was some kind of magic that attached him to their backs so he didn't shift or fall, but hippogriffs were too heavy to fly of their own accord, so rather than ride air, they rode the ambient magic of the earth itself, and he was able to feel it just as the horse-like creature had while in the air, and it was incredible.

"Good job, Harry!" Hagrid bellowed. "Yeh rode it like a professional!"

"Big deal," Draco scoffed, angered that Harry was getting so much attention and that he lost a bet to Crabbe of a galleon that the boy would fall and die. Without considering and having long-ago decided that beasts were all stupid, he walked up to the hippogriff to ride it himself and show anyone could do it, his entire stance radiating confidence and issuing challenge to the beast to be alpha. "It's a stupid horse and anyone can ride a tamed animal."

"Draco, don't!" Hagrid rushed to intercept, but it was too late, and Harry had realized it was happening too late to offer any help since Hagrid was already there.

As soon as the challenger stepped within battle distance, Buckbeak reared and whinnied in challenge before Draco realized what was happening, and the beast hit him with its front claws as Hagrid pulled him back, causing a large gash to appear in the boy's right arm.

"Buckbeak! No! No, Buckbeak!" Hagrid put his own body between the hippogriff and Draco to shield him and calmed his newest pet down before ordering Draco's two cronies to drag the crying boy to the hospital wing while he put the creature in its pen and ended class early.

As they were walking up to the school, Harry ignored Ron praising Buckbeak and his attack on Draco to berate himself for not being prepared to stop the whole confrontation. He knew it was going to happen and could have stopped Draco from getting an innocent animal killed because of his own idiocy and desire for revenge. Now, not only would he have to make sure Buckbeak was saved again, but Hermione would spend unreal amounts of time looking through magical law in an attempt to save him at his trial because of the kind-hearted girl she was.

All because he was caught up in the feelings of euphoria and joy that came from riding the hippogriff and because he didn't keep his wits about him. Moody would be turning over in his grave.

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"Let me get this straight, Mister Potter," Flitwick said in his office where Harry had met him before dinner for their discussion. "You



came to me to support you for a student-sponsored dueling club where you hope to teach the Patronus charm to anyone who wants to come and learn from you and you are coming to me instead of your own Head of House because I was a dueling champion?

Harry nodded happily. "And because I may ask for advice from you, and McGonagall already has additional duties as Deputy Headmistress that I didn't want to cause her any added stress of more."

Flitwick nodded and thought carefully. "And you say you'll coach Ravenclaw's Seeker?"

Harry grinned. "To make sure that my requests are considered, at the very least, yes. My track record here has shown that I've never done anything not deserving of the trust I'm asking for and I've already offered to allow any faculty to sit in and observe at any time they wish, but they can't force me to teach anything. Realistically, I think I'm not asking for anything that I shouldn't already have in the situation, or an older student to mentor through the whole thing if I sound too presumptuous."

Flitwick waved off Harry's concern. "No, no, my boy. You're absolutely right. I'll sponsor the club myself and agree to your stipulations. Just to be safe, though, we'll say I'm the official one in charge and that I'll take responsibility for your actions. I trust you and you're not asking for authority to give detentions or take points, just kick people out if they're causing a ruckus and making sure they listen to you. I think you're perfect for the job. Let's go to dinner, then I'll announce you and give you the floor."

The two walked into the busy Great Hall where the massive number of students were chattering away until they began to notice that Flitwick and Harry were standing in front of the teachers' dais and the noise level dropped considerably while Professor Flitwick shot sparks from his wand, gaining the attention of those who weren't quite as observant.

"Attention, everyone! Attention if you please! Mister Potter here has requested that I sponsor a student-taught defense club and I have approved it. While I am the official sponsor and will be attending each, if not most, meetings, he will be my voice and has the authority to kick anyone out if they cause disruption. If you'll listen,

I'll let him give you the details. Mister Potter?" Flitwick asked, motioning outwards with his hand to indicate the student body.

Nodding, Harry stepped forward and looked out at each of the students. "With the dementors surrounding the school and the full knowledge that they will attack a student if either antagonized or if they feel they can get away with it, I've decided to offer anyone who wishes to learn how to cast the Patronus charm. I'm also willing to teach how to duel properly with Professor Flitwick's assistance for those who find it useful to learn the charm."

Looking around at a proud and beaming Hermione, distracted Luna, furious groups of Slytherins and a few others in various states of contemplation or doubts of his ability, he continued. "No one is currently banned from these meetings, but I want to say that those who cause disruptions or any kinds of problems will be kicked out. We can't risk the safety of others because of one or a few people who don't want to play nice."

"And who are you to teach it, Potter?" Malfoy asked from the back, not believing of the rumors that Harry had cast his own Patronus. The spell was massively difficult, after all, and any one of these fools would think it were him just to kiss his bottom. "Why are you teaching it rather than our new Defense teacher or Flitwick, the Charms master?"

In response, Harry drew his wand and flicked it, causing his brilliant stag Patronus to come out. This one different from his previous one in that it was far more dense and looked to be made of water instead of mist, but still glowed brightly. Wanting to get his point across, Harry commanded the creature to protect the grounds while letting the charm feed automatically from his core and it began to radiate feelings of joy, happiness and hope outwards in waves from its body.

Students and teachers around the room gasped as the emotions projected outwards and hit them, many being overcome with a sense of peace, of safety, protected in the embrace of the light creature and felt the desire to rise above everything and protect everything they loved and cherished.

Harry let the Patronus stop its broadcasting, having always felt the emotions and not noticing any changes or that not a few of the students had to keep themselves from tearing at the incredible

emotions they had felt. At the Gryffindor table, a dreamy-eyed blonde hugged herself tightly and smiled, assured that Harry was a true friend and gave herself fully to that friendship while her house mates at the Ravenclaw table ceased all ability to think and simply felt. At the Slytherin table, several female students had to repress the shivers that went through them, saddened beyond anything they could remember that those wonderful feelings would cease and they would be back amongst those who never showed even an ounce of such selfless thoughts. At the Gryffindor table, the students who knew Harry simply basked in the feelings and could tell, without a shadow of a doubt, that it was the emotional essence of the Harry they knew and at the Hufflepuff table, several students couldn't stop themselves and accepted the incredible feelings within them and aspired to grow to match them.

Without seeing any of this, Harry put his wand away as the stag walked over and nuzzled Hermione and some of the other students, allowing it to pet them. One quirky Ravenclaw even offered it some pudding. "That is why I am going to be teaching this, Malfoy. My views on the Patronus are less limiting than what the adults think of it, so Professor Flitwick is allowing me to teach it to see if I am right, or if it really is the way they believe it to be."

The others in the Hall all quietly mourned the loss of the wonderful feelings and were silent, which Harry took as proof positive that they accepted seeing the stag Patronus as his right to teach it to them. It also wouldn't be until the next day that the dementors would be back on the Hogwarts grounds. "We'll be having the first lesson the day after tomorrow after dinner since Fridays are usually more available. Anyone who wants to learn to do that can show up, or just anyone who wants to watch. But you all need to think of your happiest memory, or some kind of an event that you know will make you happy. It can NOT be anything self-serving. This means the memory has to be something good. You can't think of someone's harm, or ruling the world or anything like that. It has to be a sincere emotion to make it work. Take all of tomorrow and Friday to think it over so you have an idea for Friday."

"What memory did you use?" An upper-year Ravenclaw asked, wondering if he could use the same one.

Harry shrugged, having gone back to the memory he had used when he did the same thing in third year, knowing it could get such a

response rather than the one he used on the train of Hermione and when they went clothes shopping. Not to say this one didn't involve her as well, of course. "I imagined how happy I would be once I had a family," he told them as the stag disappeared, along with the pudding it had eaten from a surprised Luna.

Being done with his speech, he walked down to the Gryffindor table and sat next to Hermione to load up his plate as the talking began again. Where he thought it was about what they would be learning Friday, they were actually discussing how thoughts of eventually having a family could inspire the feelings they had felt. Many of the girls began thinking of the advantages of such a desire while the boys, for the most part, were more concerned with the power aspects of thinking of their own families.

Excluding bratty little sisters, in Ron's case. She just took a bread roll before he got to it.

"That was impressive, Harry," Luna said as she fed a mewling pack of Thundercats that had settled around her and begged for fried chicken. "I look forward to learning how to cast a corporeal Patronus."

"Too right!" Ron agreed, ignoring the source of the previous statement. "Imagine being able to do it so young!"

Harry smiled and set to change the subject by asking Ron if he had thought of anything for a Quidditch club. He didn't really want to discuss his plans in the Great Hall since he didn't really have much beyond the Patronus and possibly trying to gain new friends and allies.

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"Oh, Harry!" Hermione cried happily as their talk once again switched to Harry's club while they worked in the common room. "It's going to be so wonderful to learn to do that! Can you give us some pointers now? Or maybe show us again?"

Harry chuckled as the twins perked at hearing her requests and rushed over. "No more until Friday night. Just try to think of something that makes you happy. It doesn't even have to be a real

memory, but it has to be something that inspires happiness and goodness in you."

Smiling, Harry turned to the Weasley twins. "Sorry, Diabolic Duo, but pranks aren't likely to work."

They pouted as one and began in unison. "And we had the perfect one, too."

Having been curious for a long time, Harry considered them for a moment. "Out of curiosity, are the two of you able to speak telepathically to each other, or do you just know each other that well?"

"Tell-a-whatsit?" Fred asked.

"What does topography have to do with anything?" George asked.

"He said 'telepathy'," Hermione corrected, now curious herself. "It's the ability to speak to each other in your minds."

Fred and George looked at each other and shrugged. "Not that we know of. Otherwise, Mum wouldn't have caught us talking about our plans so often," Fred said.

"What about you two?" George asked. "You two always seem to say stuff without saying it."

"What?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"We know how each other thinks," Harry said with a shrug. "Sometimes I think I hear her voice, but it's usually my conscience, telling me not to do something stupid."

"Oh yes," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "That's worked so well in the past."

"I still don't like you letting in the Slytherins," Ron said from where he had been listening. He wasn't too pleased that Harry would just let anyone show up.

Harry once again rolled his eyes. "Then don't show up. I've already said if they start anything, they're out, so it isn't a big deal."

Hermione smiled before putting on her thinking expression, nibbling her bottom lip and knitting her eyebrows together. "Is it going to hurt anything to try the spell?" She asked, getting an immediate negative.

"Nope. Not at all. You could potentially tire yourself, but that's about it if you just wanna try it."

Hermione nodded and thought of Harry's description earlier and decided to imagine passing every single one of her NEWT's with complete O's and cast the charm. "Expecto Patronum!" There was an immediate display of nothing, causing the girl to scowl and glare at the tip of her wand. "Why didn't it work?"

Harry shrugged. "It did the same thing on my first attempt. What were you thinking about, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Passing all of my NEWT's with full marks."

Harry considered her for a moment and had an interesting thought. The Hermione he had shared a tent with for three months alone had shared a lot with him. The two had been forced to cuddle together late at night in order to keep warm and sleep had been a luxury for both, so they simply talked about basically everything, including each other. Knowledge hadn't become the most important factor in her life, but her friends did. She had shared with him that learning and knowledge had always been wonderful for her, but it was also a crutch to lean and fall back on considering a near photographic memory. When she learned the trouble Harry kept getting in to, she continued learning more for his sake than anything, even though she still loved knowledge.

To that end, would her tests really mean anything to her? In comparison to everything else?

Speaking slowly as the thoughts drifted through his mind, Harry considered her for a moment before leaning in to whisper into her ear so no one else could hear. "Think of something fully non-academic, Hermione," he said, making her swallow thickly as she felt his breath on her ear. Hormones were of the bloody Devil, she was sure! "Think of something in your past that really affected you emotionally, or something in your future that you want to experience with everything you have."

The two teens ignored the twins and Ron who tried to lean forward to hear any nuggets of additional advice while Hermione shivered lightly as he pulled back. Looking at him with hazy eyes, Hermione had a very good idea of what she wanted in the very near future and imagined it, softly saying, "Expecto Patronum."

A sudden rush of mist burst from her wand and convalesced into a vaguely recognizable shape that was just barely out of being fully corporeal, but also still attached to Hermione's wand at the tip where it apparently had a tail.

Hermione shivered and finally gasped after only a few seconds as she released the spell from strain. She gulped in air, feeling like she had just run around the castle as Harry engulfed her in a happy hug.

"You did great! I can't believe you got that far on your first attempt!" He said happily. He was shocked that her Patronus would apparently be different this time around, however. It had looked like it would be some sort of cat-like creature instead of the playful otter he had come to know. But still, this fully proved his theory. She had taken over a month to learn to do that much in her fifth year in his memories.

"Second attempt," she said. "Does it always seem to stress you so much?"

Harry shook his head. "Only until you get used to the power it takes. It varies depending on the memory, too. I can cast it with two different memories, but a memory that doesn't mean as much takes more power and isn't as strong."

"Bloody hell," Ron whispered in shock. "That was brilliant!"

Hermione smiled proudly as several others in the common room decided to show up for sure. Lavender and Parvati planned to tell people Harry had taught Hermione to do the spell in only one night. They would be the center of the gossip-hub for some time with this.

"What did you think of?" Fred asked after prodding from his brother.

"Yea, you seemed to just kind of stare off there for a second," George said, backing Fred up.

Hermione blushed slightly, but her mind thought up an answer quickly. "I took Harry's idea and thought of family." Granted, it had been a sudden thought of being in a loving relationship with Harry, but she wasn't about to tell anyone that. Especially when she couldn't be sure it wasn't because of the influx of hormones the odd situation had somehow caused. The boy had been flirting with her ever since the summer had begun. She wasn't really sure if he was aware of it, but his attentions had been causing her mind to think things it hadn't done before.

"Expecto Patronum!" Ron called out gleefully, pointing his wand at the twins who dove to the sides out of reflex more than realization of anything else. To the surprise of only him, nothing happened. "Hey! I thought about my family, too! What the hell?"

Harry frowned, knowing what was wrong already. "Were you thinking of them in general, or how they make you happy or how you love them or anything?"

Ron scratched his head. "Uh, I just kind of thought of them and said the words."

Harry shook his head. "It can't be a general idea from what I've been able to tell. When I think of having a family, it isn't just thinking of that, but imagining my happiness of my wedding, teaching my first kid to fly a toy broom while my wife threatens to hex me to bits if it falls, a home; things of that nature that actually mean something to me. If I just imagine family, I can shove a bunch of magic into it, but I wouldn't really get much. I tried the first time by thinking of getting my first broom and could barely even get any mist."

Ron grumbled and walked towards the stairs. "Well, I'll think of something. I'm knackered, so good night."

Hermione looked to Harry and offered him an apologetic look as well. "Trying to cast that actually took a lot out of me, too. I think I'm ready for bed as well."

"Good night, Hermione," Harry said, giving the girl a firm hug and holding it for a full second rather than immediately letting go.



"Good night, Harry," she said through a yawn as she stumbled up to her dorm, followed moments later by a pair of rabid gossipers she shared the room with. They saw the hug and sensed weakness in the sleepy one.

xXxXxXx

Harry looked around at the full Great Hall two days later with a small amount of shock. There may have only been a handful of students who had decided not to show up while the rest stood in groups of house affiliation where their tables would normally have been located. Even the teachers had shown up to watch the proceedings, though

"Alright everyone, since we're almost all here, it can get loud really fast. So, if you have a question, raise your hand. First, is anyone capable of a fully corporeal Patronus?" Harry looked around, getting a series of negatives as people looked around themselves. "Okay. If any of you looked the charm up, forget pretty much everything but the incantation. If you have an idea for a memory that really means something to you where you were happy, go ahead and try casting. The words are 'expecto patronum' and wand movements don't really matter. On three; one, two, three!"

The sudden explosion of students saying the spell made Harry jerk back as various levels of mist and light filled the room. Impressively, however, a second-year Hufflepuff had a half-formed animal as big as she was try to crawl its way out of her wand.

The little girl squawked and dropped her wand in surprise while several upper-years gaped in shock.

Harry smiled and tilted his head back for a moment to whistle loudly, lowering in pitch as he had done as the previous year ended. Almost immediately, everyone was silent. "Good news and bad. Bad first, no one got it on their first try, but the good is, to everyone who got at least a little wispy bit of smoke and light did better than I did on my first try, which was most of you, so you're already moving faster than I did."

Harry's grin widened as the air in the room charged with the people who prided themselves in having gotten further than the Boy-Who-Lived in such a hard spell. "To those who didn't get anything, you

probably had the same problem I did at first. I wasn't using a good memory. I tried using the one of my first broom, but I had to put everything I had into it just to get a spark of light, and then I was exhausted. So, try thinking of another memory, maybe a birthday or Christmas, and see what works for you."

He looked around to everyone and cautioned, "if you feel you're getting tired, don't keep going. This is a spell that can drain you pretty quick. If you don't get a result with one memory, try another one. I'll walk around and give you guys some pointers and help, but if you find a memory that works better than another one, try to remember which ones you used and then spend the next couple of days working on seeing how they're different. That may help you figure out another memory to use or you can think up something to aspire to like I did two days ago and we'll try them out Sunday night."

Harry stepped down and met with Hermione and Ron who were happy to see him. "I noticed you got some mist, Ron. Good job."

Ron's face pinked, embarrassed after seeing a first-year student get twice as much mist as he had. "Yea, I'm gettin' better. Got any more pointers?"

"None that I haven't already given you before showing up. Where's Luna? I thought she said she was really looking forward to this, but I haven't seen her in the crowd."

Hermione and Ron shrugged, not really sure. "I don't know, Harry," Hermione said, looking around hoping to spot her newest friend. She was odd, but very nice. And it was wonderful to have someone else who enjoyed talking about magical theory so much.

Harry frowned and nodded, wondering why the girl changed her mind and had a niggling thought in the back of his mind that was just under the surface about the whole thing. "Alright. Well, if you see her, let her know I'm looking." With that, he disappeared into the crowd to begin giving group attention to those around him.

By the time they had spent an hour working at it, three students had copious amounts of mist while the majority of the others were getting minor wisps. The second-year Hufflepuff that had nearly gone corporeal had tired after her second attempt which had barely been

a blast of light before she was too weak to continue, but many of the upper years had seen it and had been spurred on to try harder.

Harry had also been interested to note that no one had caused any forms of havoc or mayhem. Not even the Weasley twins. It appeared the chance to protect themselves from dementors was more important to them all than anything else. Even some of the nastier Slytherins had remained quiet, though Harry also noticed Malfoy watched the events, but didn't participate.

"Think you're pretty great, don't you Potter?" Draco sneered as Harry came up to the Slytherins, happy to note they were willing to listen. Harry quickly took in the Slytherin's wand arm in a sling where Pomfrey had commanded him not to use magic for at least a week until she had a chance to look at it. He was actually supposed to be in the Hospital wing as it was, but was given permission to come down and see the lesson.

Even if it was being taught by his arch nemesis, it was better than being subjected to Madame Pomfrey's care, so he was gone before the woman had even finished her conditions.

Harry shook his head, wondering if he could try a different set of tactics this time around. In the life he remembered, Draco had insulted Ron, Harry's first friend, almost as soon as they had met, and Harry hadn't taken to it well. But, he was wondering if he could stop a lot of the events to come if he tried things differently, and was willing to put it to the test. It certainly couldn't hurt anything. "Not really, no. I just think the Ministry of Magic is run by a bunch of pompous fools who do whatever the person who gives them the most gold wants or whatever they think would make them look good," Harry admitted, much to Draco's surprise. He hadn't expected the Golden Gryffindor to say bad things about anyone.

"The Ministry is full of morons and dementors are stupid to have in a school full of children, so I figure we may as well do what we can to create a defense against them. Some of the people in this school suck hairy arse, but they shouldn't die because of someone's idiocy."

"What?" Draco asked, more shocked that Harry hadn't insulted him yet than Harry's actual speech.

"Anyway, if you'll excuse me, I've gotta find someone," Harry said, turning and walking towards Hermione and Ron who were still towards the front of the Great Hall while the others were filing out.

"What'd Malfoy want?" Ron asked as he eyed the confused blonde boy with disdain, getting a sneer in return once the Slytherin realized Ron was looking.

"Nothing, really. Just wanted to know if I felt I could really do this," Harry said with a distracted shrug. "I haven't seen Luna and I've been looking for her, have any of you seen her?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, sorry Harry. Perhaps she didn't come because of homework or something. We can ask her tomorrow."

"Mister Potter," McGonagall said happily as she approached, stopping Harry's response. "I am delighted to see that we were indeed wrong. We rarely have anyone above seventh year who is capable of as much mist as you have managed to get everyone to emit. I must say, I can't imagine why we've never focused on using different memories based on emotional responses before."

"I agree," Professor Flitwick said. "Our texts always proclaim to think of your happiest memory and speak nothing of the actual emotions behind the Patronus. Professor McGonagall has told me she asked you to write about your theory; would you be willing to allow me to have a copy when you are finished?"

Harry nodded and agreed. "Not a problem Professors. If you'll excuse me, I've got to run."

With their farewells done, Harry approached the Weasley twins and brought them over to a quiet area. "Guys, I'm sorry I'm doing this. I hadn't planned to ask, but I need to borrow the Marauder's Map. Can I borrow it tonight?"

Looking as shocked as they felt, both twins looked at each other and then back at Harry. "How did you know?"

Not wanting to play games, as he had suddenly remembered what that nagging memory was that had been bothering him all night,

Harry said, "my father was Prongs, a stag animagus. But I need to borrow it, if you don't mind?"

Silently conferring, the two pranksters looked at each other and nodded as one. "Alright. We suppose it's yours by right anyway, so-"

"We'll just nip up to our dorm and-"

"Get it for you."

"Thanks guys, I really appreciate this," Harry said.

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Harry looked at the closet door on the seventh floor with disgust. There was a fifth-year locking charm and silencing spell on the door to keep people out, or in this case, someone in, that was freshly cast. Looking down at the map in his hands that showed the position of everyone within the castle in real-time, Harry sighed as Luna's name showed as alone in the little closet. He cleared the map and then pocketed it.

Using the skills he had learned over the summer about minor wards from the book Lora had given him, Harry disabled the silencing spell and the locking ward rather than casting the counter charms and opened the door, seeing Luna sitting in the very back, pressed up firmly against the corner and rocking back and forth with her arms wrapped around her legs. It was very obvious she had been crying and her hair looked a fright. He glanced down at her hands and saw they were red from where she had pounded on the door for only she knew how long.

"Hello Harry," Luna said quietly, barely registering that anyone had actually come and embarrassed to have been found as she had. He recognized the signs that showed she had nearly screamed herself hoarse, probably trying to call for help. Harry was furious anyone would do this to such a kind girl. He had learned during his fifth year during talks with the girl that this had happened. Whoever had locked her in had done so and left her there the entire weekend. They had let her out in time for classes, but she had missed them thanks to spending time in the hospital wing to get her throat fixed.

"Hi Luna," Harry whispered warmly. "Do you want to come out?" He watched as she stayed silent and still and his heart ached for her. Not wanting to force the girl, knowing from personal experience how she was feeling, he instead asked, "do you mind if I come inside, then?" Without waiting for an answer, he stepped inside and closed the door, lighting his wand and sat next to the girl.

They were silent for nearly a minute before Luna's voice asked, "how did you find me?"

Harry smiled warmly. "Magic," he told her simply. Remembering that it had helped her in fifth year on occasion, he slowly put his arm around her shoulders to comfort the girl, making sure she had plenty of time to tell him to stop. Instead, she simply leaned into his side and began to cry. She couldn't help it. No one had comforted her like this since her mother had died four years ago. Her father had, but after she had stopped crying each night, he stopped with hugs and began to explain how everything that happened in life was because of the creatures he wrote about. It was why he was always hunting them down, so people would know how to protect themselves from things that made them sad, confused or angry.

And Harry was her friend. Something else she hadn't had in such a very long time.

So Luna cried. She wrapped her own arms around him and squeezed just as hard as she could as Harry lifted her to sit in his lap and cuddled with her. He knew why this had happened. Several students in Ravenclaw had learned how a group of Slytherins had locked her in the dungeons during her first year and how she was terrified of small, dark places, which only increased after spending a day alone in the dungeon cell where she had developed claustrophobia. Thinking it was funny, they left her here, but longer than the day she had spent downstairs in the dungeons.

"Who did this?" He asked after several minutes after her sobs died down to the occasional hiccup, wondering if she would tell him. She hadn't when she told him about it in the past. All she told him was they had taken her wand and it was outside the door when they unlocked it two days later.

Luna shook her head into Harry's chest. "If you tell, it'll only get worse," she mumbled. "And I don't want you to get in trouble for me."

Harry wanted to deny it, but knew it was true. His own experiences told him as much, and they allowed a hell of a lot more to happen in Hogwarts than they did in muggle schools. Deciding to try and start some of those talks early, especially since it would let her know he empathized with her, he decided to share some of his own history. He had already told her once, so it was easier this time around, even if she didn't remember it. "I've been locked in a cupboard before, too," he said simply, running his fingers through her hair in a way he knew calmed Hermione.

"Really?" She asked, wondering who would do that to him.

"Mhm," he nodded. "The Dursleys are who I used to live with. My aunt is Petunia. She's my mother's sister. Her husband Vernon and their son, Dudley. They hate magic so, when I went to live with them after my parents died, they kept me in the cupboard under the stairs until after my first year here. It was actually smaller than this closet was," he told her, looking around. "I was locked in when I was sent to bed and any time something happened that I got in trouble for. Sometimes it lasted for days. But, I just wanted you to know that this type of thing hasn't only happened to you."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as Luna nuzzled into Harry's chest some more in comfort. Before, she had been sure something was going to get her in the closet; lethifolds, boggarts, one of the dementors roaming the school or any number of other things. Now, she felt safe and warm, and didn't want it to end. Once it did, she would have to go back to Ravenclaw Tower and back to the others.

"Why did you come?" She asked him after several minutes of contented cuddling. "How did you even know to find me?"

Harry didn't stop stroking her hair or hugging her as he replied. "You said you were looking forward to the Patronus lessons, and I didn't see you there, so I thought something was up. The dementors just came back about midday, after all, and I knew you wouldn't have not come without a good reason. So, I looked for you because we're friends. And friends are always there to help each other when they need someone there for them."

She was amazed at how incredible that final statement made her feel. It had been so very long since she had friends...

"I'm sorry I missed your lesson," she said quietly, wondering if he would hate her for that.

Harry chuckled and used his wand to open the closet door. "Accio Luna's wand," he said.

"That won't work," she told him. "They probably have it in another room in Ravenclaw Tower, and we're too far away for it to show up."

Harry smiled and squeezed her comfortingly. "I can summon things from one end of the castle to the other without any troubles," he told her. Almost as if on cue, her wand flew into his hand. He handed it to her with a grin. "Wanna have a private lesson?" He asked her.

Blushing lightly, she nodded against him, looking at her wand carefully. She knew it took a massive amount of power to summon things from those kinds of distances, but she hadn't even felt the release from him. Especially when it had to go a random path to get past any walls and obstacles.

Harry wrapped her in both arms after she maneuvered herself so that she sat with her back against his chest where he rested his head on her shoulder. He knew she loved hugs and cuddling, but he hadn't expected her to stay in his lap. He closed the closet door part way and cast confundus charms in the hallway so anything that was alive would want to go elsewhere, just in case they saw the light. "Okay. Now, I want you to think of your happiest memory, or a memory that makes you happy and fills you with intense emotions. Then, you can just say 'Expecto Patronum' and you should have a Patronus come out, or at least some light. Not everyone gets it right on their first try, I didn't and even Hermione didn't, so don't be discouraged if it doesn't happen. We've already proven that the memory plays a big part of it."

Luna listened to his explanation and then nodded, deciding to use the recent memory of him opening the door and sitting with her. That had been the happiest she had been in a very long time. "Expecto Patronum," she said, causing a large white cloud to come from her wand. It was nothing more than a basic shield, much like his first



successful attempt with Professor Lupin before coming back, but it was far more than he had accomplished in anywhere near that much time. It was wonderful what having the memories of teaching that same charm nearly two years ago in his own mind did for his teaching now.

"Wonderful, Luna!" He said, hugging her tightly enough to make her squeak. She quickly decided they were her most favorite hugs ever. "It took me months to get that far along!"

She smiled shyly and looked into her lap after letting the spell end. It was somewhat tiring, but she would be willing to do it a lot more.

"You did wonderful, Luna," Harry said again, hugging her once more and then releasing her. "But, it's well past curfew. We need to get you back to the dorms."

Luna sighed sadly and got up. She hadn't been scared of the closet at all while he had been there, she noticed. "You should go to your dorm or we both risk catching Filch."

Harry smirked and grabbed Luna's hand, casting the disillusionment charm over her head and then his own. He decided he would start carrying his cloak as a matter of course from this point forward. "As long as we're holding hands, we won't trip over each other and this way, I can make you visible again before you go in so no one is the wiser."

Luna blinked where he couldn't see, even though he was looking at the space she would have been, and nodded. "That is certainly better than detention."

"You bet your bottom it is," Harry said happily. While it was a common phrase, the entire night was more friendship than Luna had experienced in years, and she wasn't prepared to handle it very well, even worse than Harry when he first arrived to Hogwarts.

Blushing, and happy he couldn't see it, Luna squeezed his hand during the entire walk as they started out from the broom closet. "Thank you, Harry."

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Harry thanked the creators of the disillusionment charm as Filch passed him to chase down Peeves as the spectre pelted the man with paint balls. He had taken Luna back to her common room and received one last good night hug before he left her to head back to the seventh floor to the Room of Requirement. He was just so angry that someone had done that to Luna and that he hadn't even considered trying to protect her from it. It was also partly anger at himself, though. He had known what was happening to her in his previous life and had not wanted to be singled out or put in the spotlight than he had been, so he had left her to her tormentors, all because he didn't want to handle the school thinking he was friends with her.

And that knowledge hurt.

Now, he was befriending her earlier and planned to make up for all of the shite that he had allowed to continue, all because he was being an ass. He had laughed at her just like everyone else until they started their talks, but even though he stopped making fun of the girl, he never really became more friendly than those discussions and had never stopped it from happening, which he was ashamed to acknowledge.

'Not this time,' he thought to himself.

Moments later, he began to pace in front of a blank space of the wall and thought, 'I need a room to practice dueling in for the coming years,' and on his third pass, a heavy metal door appeared. Harry quickly opened it and stepped inside to close the door before turning to look at what the room provided him with.

On his left were rows of various weapons, all bladed, he noted, and a book shelf filled with information on proper dieting and exercises. On the right, he had various training dummies that looked almost real and had numbers that varied by difficulty.

And in the center, was another Harry, looking right back at him. This one, however, was covered from neck to feet in a black bodysuit of some kind that was molded to his body and looked like it was made of black leather and black metal with runes etched into the entire structure. At his hip, where Harry had sheathed the Sword of Gryffindor, the new Harry had a sword that looked like quicksilver that was somehow holding its shape.

"There will be no mercy," the faux Harry said, much to the real Harry's surprise. "Defend yourself!"

Harry's eyes bulged and he dove to the side as a cutting curse hit the door. Harry jumped up and protected himself with a shield spell just before a bludgeoning hex caught his shoulder, making it rebound with a loud gong and then he went on the offensive.

"Bloody magic always trying to bloody kill me! AH!" With a battle cry, he cast a chain of spells and tried to get to the center of the room where he had more room.

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[Author's Note:] - Next chapter, Dumbledore comes to conclusions of Harry's new confidence and abilities and, when faced with a boggart, what does Harry fear most?

## Chapter8 – Vengeance Flies on Swift Wings

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Challenges: On my profile is a link to my FF (DOT) Net Forums. On those forums are challenge requests in the Harry Potter and Naruto universes. I'd greatly appreciate any views on those challenges or anyone who would like to accept them, feel free to let me know. I'd personally like to know if anyone finds them as decent plot devices or not. If you do accept a challenge, feel free to reply to the forum and let others know, preferably after you've posted the first chapter so they have something to visit and you can link to it.

Luna's birthday isn't actually given, thus I will state she was born Oct 31, 1980. As Hermione was too young by a mere two weeks to start Hogwarts one year earlier than she did (and thus, joined Harry's class,) Luna was born two months too late to start at the same time as Harry, but is only three months younger than he is.

To all Anonymous Reviewers: I don't mind receiving criticism, but I would like to explain myself if you ask a question. How else do you expect me to answer you? To "A Reader" who reviewed anonymously, I AM doing an expense account for Dobby rather than paying him directly. It's easier for Harry to do this than give him galleons while at school and it's easier to pay him than deal with an angry Hermione. I don't care if you want to criticize or flame me, but have the stones to leave a way to respond so I can answer questions if you ask them. Or make an account, if need be. Free, immediate and no spam. I honestly don't mind flames. I've received several for this story and haven't even deleted them.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Manipulator of Destiny" by Wheezy1 (H/Hr, Nev/Lu – And it's COMPLETE, TOO! HUZZAH!)

xXx Previously xXx

"You bet your bottom it is," Harry said happily. While it was a common phrase, the entire night was more friendship than Luna had experienced in years, and she wasn't prepared to handle it very well, even worse than Harry when he first arrived to Hogwarts.

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[edit]

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xXx STORY xXx

Harry awakened the next morning with a groan of pain as the wind-up alarm clock he had purchased over the summer jingled away, stuck to the post of his bed inside of the curtains which were automatically silenced when closed so it wouldn't awaken his friends. He had learned the first morning back that they were very angry early risers. He wasn't sure which one did it, or what it was, but someone had even launched a hex at him when he took his time turning the little bugger off.

He had decided to keep his early morning workout schedule so he wouldn't lose the benefits of the entire summer's workouts and just simply took his workout clothes of shorts and a T-shirt that he normally shucked about half way through his routine and his day clothes to the Room of Requirement, which would provide him a

shower afterwards where he could change into fresh clothes and Dobby could take the others to be cleaned.

Stretching as he made his way into the common room, he saw Twinkle, the only Thundercat he had created with silver eyes as the Thundercat leader, standing on the top of the couch. After the events of the night before, from both finding Luna locked in a closet where she had nearly screamed herself hoarse and the sudden ferocity of the Room of Requirement had taken to training him, Harry had trudged back to the common room still in extremely foul spirits where he gave the Thundercats orders to keep an eye on all of the Ravenclaws to find out who was actively attacking Luna and who wasn't, but still knew about it so the proper retribution could be obtained. "Hello Twinkle. I trust you have some information for me?"

"Yes, Master. We've managed to identify the ones responsible for placing Miss Luna into the closet. Three girls were upset to find she had managed to escape and find her wand and are currently in the planning stages for another prank since she got out of that one, but have yet to actually let out their plan where we could hear and have written nothing down. So far, four others know things are happening to her, but we cannot be sure if they know what exactly or how bad it truly is. Then everyone in her own dorm is fully aware of the theft of Miss Luna's property and the things put into her bed. Some boys seem to be rude, but don't seem to actively act out against her. For some reason, it seems to be mostly the girls who actually act against Miss Luna while the boys seem to ignore her or laugh at her misfortune and do nothing to help her, seeing her torment as a spectator's sport of some sort."

"They're guilty, then," Harry said firmly. "And the Prefects? Are they aware of anything?"

"We are unsure as of yet. It seems they haven't heard anything directly; at least not while we were watching. They haven't spoken of the situation and no one has spoken directly to them. But it has only been a night. We may learn more by the time the three who locked Miss Luna into the closet decide on their plans for retaliation."

Harry nodded. "Get names of anyone who is aware of anything at all. Those who actively hurt her, I want at the top of the list. Anyone who hears things are happening but don't tell anyone, I want to know of them as well. If you hear of anything happening or about to happen

to her or anyone else on the protected list, let me know as soon as possible if it's something that could hurt them so I can take care of it, understand?"

Twinkle nodded and offered a salute of his fist over his heart. "I hear and obey. I would like to let you know, however, that they have taken her shoes last night after they realized she managed to escape, and hid her underthings in the common room."

Harry growled in the back of his throat. "Find them and get them back to her. If you know who specifically did it, send our little warning," he ordered. He had ordered the Thundercats to remain out of sight and hidden unless they needed to step in for something life or death so that they could remain as unknown informants as long as possible, excluding their usual behavior of course. While everyone knew they existed, no one knew many details about them. Even Hermione only understood the basics, though there was no telling what Luna knew.

"Yes, Master," Twinkle said, dropping his salute and disappearing in a burst of speed that made him seemingly apparate away. Harry still couldn't figure out how he would be there one moment and then suddenly be gone or just suddenly appear out of nowhere. He hadn't planned for them to be created like that, it just kind of happened and they couldn't explain it.

It was spooky.

Shaking his head, he hurried off to the Room of Requirement where he had every intention of going through his training regimen, now more thorough and painful after adding new exercises with the books the room had provided, but Harry preferred it so he could sink his frustrations into it, which he did with gusto.

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"Are you alright, Harry? You look exhausted," Luna commented as Harry plopped into the seat across from her and Hermione at the Gryffindor table for breakfast. She reached over and placed her hand on his forehead in concern, hoping he wasn't coming down with something. "You should watch out for Inkleglots during colder months, you know. They make you feel sick and weaken your body

so you can't fight off illnesses as well. They're terrified of scarves, though. Perhaps you should wear one."

Harry smiled as he shook his head, amused at the girl's antics. She was so sincere it was almost painful. She was doing much better than she had when they met in his previous life, though. "Nah, nothing like that. But I'm not used to these new exercises, and they're a pain in the butt."

Luna cocked her head to the side and resisted the urge to look as she asked, "what kind of exercises require the use of your butt?"

Harry froze as the implications in her tone of voice kicked in. "Er, I mean they're exhausting."

Again, the blonde girl looked at him askance. "Your new exercises use your butt and exhaust you?" Concerned eyes shifted to a pink-faced and amused Hermione who could barely hold her laughter in. "Is this normal?" The blonde asked with a slight twinkle in her eye.

"Luna!" Harry spluttered. "I just mean I'm doing new exercises in the mornings and I'm not used to them."

"Why didn't you say so?" Luna asked, smiling gleefully.

"Cheeky minx," Harry muttered. "Do you know how to render animals for their parts?" He asked, changing the subject from aspirations on his sexual orientation.

"Why on earth would you want to know that," Hermione asked with wide eyes.

Harry leaned forward so no one could overhear even though no one was close to them yet and Ron wasn't down to eat. Hermione had stopped waking the redhead up after learning that Harry woke earlier than she did to exercise and generally met Luna in the Great Hall for several interesting conversations, so he usually came down with the other boys since he didn't care for talking about theory. "I'm thinking there may be some use for that basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. Even if there isn't, I'm sure we could sell it for a decent amount. I figure they're rare enough that something should be able to come out of it."



He hadn't wanted to go into the hidden chamber again before, but was curious to explore it this time around. Why would Slytherin just build a giant room with a big bust of his own head just to house a giant snake that wasn't even that big a thousand years ago? And if there was another way into the school through there, he would rather know about it and block it off before Voldemort had the chance to use it when he came back again. The snake couldn't have survived a millennium on rats alone, after all. Rats were smart and would have stopped going in the room. And some of those bones were far too large to be a rat. Or even a dog, for that matter.

Both girls' eyebrows rose in surprise while Luna said, "yes, I know how to render animals, but it's done magically. I don't know if it will work on a basilisk. I believe they're mostly resistant to magic, even more so than dragon hide, but without scales like a dragon, they're far less impact resistant. So, we may have to figure out a way other than spells to render it. I don't know how to do it without magic."

Hermione frowned and looked between both of the others. "Are we even allowed to take its parts? Wouldn't it belong to the school or the Ministry?"

Luna shook her head and explained before Harry, who had read up on the matter during the summer for just this reason, could. "In pursuit of saving the lives of others against dangerous animals, whoever kills the creature has the right of conquest to its body. At least in this case. There are reservations where beasts like this are allowed to breed for later hunting, or those who wish to can get a license."

"That's horrible!" Hermione said in indignation. The idea that they would raise creatures just to be killed later went against everything she believed in for fairness and equality.

"No different than raising chickens for eggs or later getting eaten in the muggle world," Harry said with a shrug, causing Hermione to make a scrunchy face. "Yes, it isn't a good thing, but we need magical ingredients for potions and stuff that needs to come from somewhere. At least they don't allow indiscriminate killing of fairies and such anymore."

"Officially, at least. There will always be poaching," Luna said sadly. The fairies around her home had been something of her only friends

for the past few years and they had eventually begun to talk to her, finding her just as interesting as she did them when they learned she held no bad intentions towards them.

And she left them tiny mirrors, too.

Hermione huffed a moment before she decided to change the subject. She rather liked chicken. "I overheard some information about Draco earlier. Apparently, he's not being allowed to go back to classes by Madame Pomfrey until Wednesday."

Harry nodded, remembering much the same. "Yea, I heard that too."

Suddenly, Hermione remembered something Harry had promised her a while back, into the summer. "Harry, remember our summer project? When are we going to start working on that again?"

Harry swallowed his eggs before he realized what in particular she was talking about. "Oh, our occlumency," he said in surprise, not realizing Hermione had been trying to not say the actual word in case he hadn't wanted Luna to know. "I guess we can work on it each night before we go to bed."

Luna blinked as she looked at both of her new friends in shock. "You do realize all documents pertaining to the mental arts are highly restricted by the Ministry, don't you? You cannot find books on it on the public market at all. And it's almost impossible to learn if not by someone who already knows and teaches you or with a quality book about it?"

"It's restricted?" Hermione asked as she paled.

"Not if it's a part of a family library, as the Ministry has no authority over such material because it's against law and custom to oversee what each family has due to family magic and grimoires," Harry said as his family rings provided him with the legal information. "Even restricted things are allowed in those once tagged as familial in nature. The Ministry can only restrict information that it actually knows is not a general practice and what can be sold to the public. There is nothing special about occlumency or legilimency for anyone to claim it as family magic, but so many families have it in their library that they can only make sure no one sells it. So, in order for them to restrict something in a family library, they have to know what

is in it and claim it from everyone who has it and take it from their libraries, and it is never going to be allowed since no one who has those family libraries will allow it to be accessed by anyone outside of the family."

"It's true," Luna confirmed as a gaggle of Thundercats came into the Great Hall, intent upon finding the youngest students possible to beg for table scraps. Harry had designed them to hunt rats and small vermin to help keep the pest population down, but they had learned of the delicious wonderment that was bacon and now hunted mostly for pelts for clothing and to keep the students safe from the diseases that were carried while growing and maintaining their hunting abilities. As each found their targets and split up, Luna continued, seeing the ones who seemed to gravitate to her each meal time approach quickly, "the Ministry is headed by all old, pureblood families, or newer ones who've risen in the social hierarchy as families have been wiped out, and absolutely none of them want their family magic found and put into the Ministry's archive since it would inevitably find its way into someone else's library or sold."

"But- But magic should be shared with everyone! Not hoarded up by people who don't want to share!" Hermione cried out. It was almost sacrilegious in her eyes not to share knowledge with everyone.

Luna shook her head emphatically. "No. It shouldn't. Not everything. I can't say much, but my own family's magic is very unique and could be extremely dangerous if anyone with bad intentions were to have it. I know the same is true for the Potter family's as well. They've been around even longer than most of the other families and is bound to have a large number of potentially dangerous spells."

Harry nodded sadly. "It's true. Think of it like information on how to build a weapon of mass destruction out of every day household items. Some spells are a lot like that. We've got a secondary library with a few thousand books, actually, that are all purely family magic and the research they did for them or just magical history of our own accounts rather than what people in power will say to put a spin on things as any government is likely to do. Everything from unique potions, family-created rituals and spells for whatever are in that library. But, there are some that, while made with good intentions if the history with each spell that explained why it was created or such means anything, are good, they have the potential do to incredible

damage. In general, they tend to be more powerful than standard spells of the same type because they're crafted differently and the theory is deeper."

"Deeper?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Yea. You'll see when we get a little further in Arithmancy and into spell creation, but there are different ways to create a spell. The way you do it makes it more or less efficient depending on what it does and how it was created. There are ways to bypass several bits that used to be done a lot more, but it makes them a great deal weaker whereas the older way was more time-consuming and required more work to make it function properly, but made it far more efficient and thus, more powerful. Basically, shortcuts became mainstream to make creation faster, but less efficient. That's the same reason we have wand movements and even wands. We can do anything without them if we simply knew how," Harry explained, knowledge from his own readings coming in.

Hermione immediately resolved to look ahead in her books to see what Harry was talking about, but would later be very disappointed to find it wasn't even touched upon in the newer texts that found the old methods obsolete with the newer and faster ones. Even Harry only knew because of his newest book acquisition. "Alright, I suppose you make a lot of sense. I still think knowledge should be freely given, though. I don't see why they would restrict something as useful as occlumency."

"Because it can be used to stop the affects of certain potions like Veritaserum and their own legilimens. And the most powerful can block the affects of an obliviation, though it generally takes decades to learn to such a proficiency," Luna told Hermione as she gave each Thundercat a large piece of ham.

"How do you know all of this?" Hermione asked, eying the blonde carefully. For knowledge that was restricted, the girl knew an awful lot about it. The depth of her knowledge had both surprised Hermione and pleased her to no end to actually have someone to talk to with such a quick and sharp mind. Harry had made huge changes and had become someone to talk to, but nothing like the intelligence of the blonde Ravenclaw. The girl was practically an encyclopedia of magical lore. Hermione doubted the veracity of

some of it, true, but safe topics that had nothing to do with creatures always made perfect sense.

"My father has known how to occlude his mind for quite some time and I grew up learning the means to do so before going to bed. It is a wonderful way to calm yourself after a long day or to deal with any ... frustrations," Luna replied hesitantly, thinking of the many hours she had put into doing just that to lock away the worst of the tormenting she had gone through. She still remembered, but the memories were pretty much detached from the emotions that went with them, now. Those upsetting memories had become the outer shell of her mental defenses and was so thick and full of pain and anguish that most people left her mind as quickly as they entered and had a day-long migraine. The only exception to these bad memories was the night before. She wanted to remember that, and her subsequent rescue by her newest friend, forever.

Hermione nodded, not sure if it was true, but believing it was likely. Magically-raised children seemed to have huge advantages over muggleborn children. "Oh. Then, when can we get to that, Harry?"

Harry pondered for a few moments as he chewed until he came to a decision. "I don't know legilimency yet, so it's going to take a little while to be proficient enough to know if we're really occluding our minds properly, but I guess we can start tonight. Is that okay?" He asked, looking at Hermione as she nodded happily.

"You are aware that, if you do break through her barriers, especially as a novice legilimencer, that you won't be able to fully control what you do or do not see, don't you?" Luna asked delicately. "The slightest thought that enters your mind, regardless of whether or not it is a desire to see or to not see something could pull up a memory of such a thing. Nothing could be hidden unless the one practicing occlumency is strong enough to block the various things they would rather want to remain hidden. So, you have to realize that you may see anything from a day of studying, or a random day in your pasts or to times in the showers or even dreams of every sort, regardless of their content."

Hermione blushed brilliantly and darted her eyes to Harry who was nodding. Did he know this? He had said something similar before, but hadn't been quite so blunt with the fact that there would be

nothing she could hide if she wasn't occluding her mind properly. "So, we could potentially see anything then?"

Luna nodded. "The slightest thought can bring forth memories related to that thought. If one was looking into the mind of the other and thought of family, cooking, pets, secrets, favorite foods, places, nudity, sex or emotional feelings, those could be brought up and novices on both sides may find it difficult to either block the memory from being seen or stop seeing it if they don't know how to pull back easily or quickly. The same holds true for flying time, sleeping, eating, conversations or memories of people that person has. Anything can be seen if not done properly. It's even more worrisome because it is possible to push a certain memory at a person who has entered your mind and force them into it, so even the person who doesn't want certain ones seen can accidentally show it all on their own. That's why you're supposed to go several layers deep and why it's so hard to learn without a competent teacher who can stop viewing immediately. It's just the nature of the technique."

Hermione shuddered as she considered that bit of information. She had been entering puberty even before she started Hogwarts, so it was only natural that certain thoughts and dreams would come about. However, with the past summer spending so much time at Harry's and all of the flirting and coming over in time to see him usually less than half clothed, it had all centered around thoughts of him and the idea that he may fancy her. If either of them could share those memories just by thinking they didn't want it to be seen, then there was no telling what could happen, and she began to really doubt their plans for the first time.

"I'll let Hermione go first, then," Harry said, feeling relatively confident about his own defenses. At least for everything that had to remain hidden, for sure. He had several risqué dreams and fantasies about several girls in his past, as any teenager was like to do, but knew Hermione wouldn't hold that against him. Be embarrassed, most likely, but he trusted her. Unless she saw his fantasy of spanking her, anyway. All bets were off if she saw that one and he would be sending Gringotts a will before they began, just in case. "I trust her to understand what she sees or let me know if something is wrong. That's the whole point of asking her to be the one to help and practice with me."

Feeling mischievous, Harry decided to let his new Marauder side out to play. "There is one dream I had where all of the girls in Hogwarts were given a new, far more revealing dress code that might get me into trouble, but that's the only one I can think of." Looking at both girls a few times to make sure they knew he was thinking of the two of them and keeping his face as clear of smiles as possible, he continued, "but I definitely think it would be worth the beatings and hexings to actually see. All you need to wear is a tie and stockings."

He smiled cheekily as both girls blushed fiercely and gaped, trying to say something and only getting squeaks.

It was going to be a good day.

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"Potter!" Snape snarled out almost as soon as he had Harry in his sights. The man now had bubblegum pink hair, was even more pale than normal, though with a dashing shade of pink on his cheeks as his face was designed to look like a Geisha of the past, wearing a green elf costume that would be more appropriate on one of Santa's elves, complete with bells on his curled shoes, and apparently, couldn't stop river dancing.

Harry burst into laughter.

"Ten points from Gryffindor! Now, tell me how to stop this bloody prank or it's a week of detentions, Potter!" Snape yelled angrily, albeit, slightly out of breath.

"I didn't do that to you, Professor. I don't know how to stop it," Harry admitted, wishing it had been him. Not wanting to risk testing his occlumency shields now that Hermione had reminded him that he had no real idea how strong they were, Harry made a concerted effort into keeping his gaze away from the older man's eyes.

"If I find out you had anything to do with this, you're going to get detention for a month scrubbing cauldrons and cleaning the toilets with your tongue!" Snape threatened, though him dancing away seemed to take a lot of the threat out of it.

Intrigued, and realizing allies were everywhere, he made a mental note to speak to the twins later that night while he watched Snape dance away.

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Dobby cried quietly as he looked over the green lawn of a large cottage in Sweden. This was the last house Master Harry owned that he had left to check and he had finally found his Master's lost house elves. In front of him was a graveyard, interspersed with headstones and tombs where several dozen Potter house elves were laid to rest.

Dearest Master,

Please do not be upset with us, but we cannot be there to welcome you home when you finally take up your Lordship. We want to, so very badly, but we haven't the strength to go on.

My name is Solaris. I am the last surviving house elf to the Great House of Potter, the final direct line of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. I, and thirteen others, were sent here by Master James Potter after his parents died during his schooling. Since he had no need of us there, we were sent to the Sweden home where our masters before you created a home for us so we would feel more like family and raise our own younglings.

After Master James' parents died, a wizard war broke out and he was too busy to call upon us when he graduated as he planned, but married his love and had a child, Master Harry. We know Master James or Master Harry will find his way here in the future and are proud of them and their youngling.

But, because Master James never accepted our bonds directly before sending us away, we began to lose our magics and the weakest of us fell after four years when we had to survive on our own powers. We continued to grow weaker, even conserving our magics and doing our jobs without them. But we would not leave the property to become part of another family. We all agreed and would rather die as Potters than live the indignity of living as anything else. We knew of Master James' death and mourned him, and hope the best for his youngling.



As we are tied to no Master with Master James' death, our strengths began to fail, but we want our newest Master to know we will always be proud of our family.

It is the summer of my eighth year and I only have a few days left, I am sure. I do not want to dirty your home when you return to it in the future, so I will take care of my own burial.

Solaris

House Elf to the Great House of Potter. Forever in Spirit even while no longer in Body

Dobby was even more proud to be a member of this family now than he was at any point in his short life as a Potter as he learned of the honor of the house elves before him and learned of their fate. He had found where Solaris buried herself, the ground having killed her before she could magic it into its proper place, so he had fixed it and cleaned the property and grounds after finding her final note.

Dobby looked at the vast expanse of field before him and the numerous plaques and headstones. "Dobby swears on his magic and life that he will uphold the pride and honor of those who is coming before him. Dobby will not fail Master Harry or any of the Potter house elves' memories of our family."

Nodding in conviction and pride, the tiny elf spun and marched off, feeling the need to help his Master and make the Potter name great again with all the assistance he could provide. Master Harry had explained to him that a war was coming and that all of the death eaters would hurt a lot of people, so Dobby decided to do everything in his power to help his Master Harry.

And he knew just the way to start, too.

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Harry stopped in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady and was about to give the password when he cocked his head to the side and had a curious thought. "What would it take to get a second password to enter the Gryffindor common room?"

The woman in pink looked at him oddly for a moment. "My dear, you only need to give me the order. As a portrait, I am unable to disobey you, even over the Headmaster's own orders."

Harry blinked. "Oh. That's good, but why? Isn't that a major security risk to let students do that?"

"Yes," she answered, "but you are the only student who could do such a thing, young Heir."

Harry's eyes widened as realization dawned; he was an heir of all four founders! He knew he could enter the Headmaster's office or pass any door tied to the castle's own security system, but had not expected to be able to command the castle's defenses himself. How useful was that? "Oh! I didn't know that."

The Fat Lady frowned. "I suppose not. The school has been trying to talk with you since your arrival, but you have not learned to hear her yet. She would like me to tell you to travel to your exercise location and create a room to speak to her when you can."

"The school wants to talk to me?" He asked in surprise. "I didn't know the school was even alive."

"Not fully, no. But she is partially sentient and has enough self-awareness to be considered as such, much like any of us portraits, only with many more abilities. What would you like your new password to be?"

"I don't want a new password, but one that is in use for just one person," Harry explained. "One of the Ravenclaws is severely tormented and is sometimes locked out of her own dorm and common room, so I want her to be able to come here whenever she has need to."

"Ah," the Fat Lady said sadly, "that's what that is about. We have seen her roam the hallways at night, sometimes in robes, others in pajamas or even naked a few times last year. We know she attempts to gain entry, but the knocker is unable to understand her for some reason. We always suspected it was more of her odd behavior."

"It isn't, and that's why I have a new password for you for Luna," Harry said, looking around to make sure no one was able to hear. "If she comes to you and says 'Moonbeams are bridges to our dreams,' then I want you to open, no matter the time of day or night. Can you do that and not tell anyone?" Harry asked.

"It is done," the Fat Lady said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks," Harry said. He knew from his talks with Luna that she had been locked out of the Ravenclaw common room multiple times since her first year by upper years in an attempt to get her in trouble and detentions when Filch caught her. He rarely did, as she had created a small place of refuge to go to after they began to take her clothes first or hex them to be unbearable to touch, which was a charm she had never been able to reverse and was forced to remove them anyway or end up with blisters as it irritated her skin.

"You're welcome," the Fat Lady said as she opened the portal to the Gryffindor common room.

"I didn't give you the current password," Harry said with a raised eyebrow.

"And you needn't since everything tied to the school can sense you. You are our rightful owner and we will do as you request. We'll only require a password if another is around unless you simply command us to open for safety reasons."

Smirking at the usefulness, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room and headed to his dormitory to get the vials and specimen containers as he pondered the new knowledge. That was a very interesting and promising bit of knowledge.

xXxXxXx

Draco glowered at the Queen of Pain as she walked away from him after her most recent bout of administering her unique brand of torture. Oh sure. He knew her name was Poppy Pomfrey and that she was doing her best to heal him, but the woman was absolute torture!

The Malfoy heir gently rubbed his arm over the gauze and wrappings as his wounds itched themselves closed; or so it felt. As

surprising as it sounded, and he was definitely surprised to hear it, the wounds caused by the hippogriff were magical in nature like cuts by certain breeds of dragons and resistant to magical healing. Resistant, but not immune, which is why he was here rather than St Mungo's, which the matronly healer made a point to mention each day. And usually just before saying how stupid he was to brazenly approach such a proud animal after being told it was a fool thing to do.

What was worse was that no one but Professor Snape, Crabbe and Goyle agreed with him that it was that oaf Hagrid's fault! Professor Snape even pointed out that Harry had approached the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress about the situation before anyone else had and placed the blame squarely on the young Malfoy's shoulders!

It was okay, though. Severus, his godfather, had called Lucius Malfoy and explained the situation and Draco's father assured them both that he would take care of the feathered problem. They couldn't remove Hagrid from his new position as Care of Magical Creatures professor, as he was no longer on the Board of Governors and couldn't blackmail them properly, and none of them would accept bribes from him any longer, but they knew Hagrid was the type who went soft for his loathsome beasts, and getting the thing killed would have to suffice for now.

Draco picked at his breakfast as he thought of ways to get back at Potter. Severus had promised to make Potions class hell for the bastard, but there was just something about doing it yourself that made results like that more pleasant.

xXxXxXx

"Hello Myrtle," Harry greeted as he, Hermione, Ron and Luna entered the sulky ghost's bathroom. They had asked Ginny if she wanted to see the giant snake get cut into its base components and see the Chamber of Secrets again, but the girl had paled and begged off, saying she had to study the next month's worth of material for Charms. Harry was sure it had been Ron's delivery that spooked her so badly.

"Hello Harry," the lady ghost replied with what seemed to be an attempt at a seductive smile and giggle.

"I know I promised to come back and talk to you, and I plan to do that tomorrow, actually," Harry said while the others waited near the door and listened. "But at the moment, we were going to the Chamber of Secrets and I was wondering if you would like to go down with us. The snake that killed you is dead if you want to see it. It's perfectly safe now."

Myrtle stared at Harry carefully, an unusual feeling swelling in her ethereal form. It was ... different ... being invited to do something. And it was doubly different for anyone to care to remember any of their promises to her. Most promised to talk to her only so they could get away.

Or they just ran.

"Alright, Harry. I'd like to join you," she said softly. The girls were both able to recognize that the ghost-girl was lonely and found it strange to be included and Ron was annoyed that he had yet another barmy girl to deal with.

Harry hissed at the sinks in the center of the girls restroom and the eyes of all of the girls widened as the sinks spread apart. As soon as the sinks stopped moving, the children looked down into the dark hole, the bottom obscured by shadows. Just as Harry was about to jump down, Hermione grabbed his arm and yanked him back with a growl.

"Do you honestly think Salazar Slytherin would slide down a giant pipe covered in slime and grime?"

Harry blinked in confusion. "Well, there aren't any stairs and we don't know another way down," he responded.

Rolling her eyes and huffing, Hermione looked at the edges of the gaping maw in the floor. "Tell it to make stairs or something and we'll see if that does anything."

Surprised, Harry looked down and hissed, §Activate stairs, create stairs, open stairs, stairs.§ Almost immediately after Harry finally said 'stairs' by themselves, the staggered stones of the pipe began to slide inward and formed stairs four feet wide.

"That is so wrong," Ron grumbled. "That thing had so much slime my back was soaked last time."

Smiling proudly, Hermione looked at both boys as Myrtle smirked. Luna looked oddly disappointed. Slides were fun.

"Alright, alright, smart lady," Harry grumbled good-naturedly. "Follow me." He took his wand out and started his way down as the others followed. He made sure to listen for any sounds that could indicate any other snakes, just in case the one he had killed had actually been a mother. It made him happy he was bringing Luna, as she had been the one to warn him.

Harry still made sure the Sword of Gryffindor was hung at his hip all the same, however, even though it still didn't seem to want to leave his side. He had disillusioned it before coming to Hogwarts, but was already used to its weight since he wore the thing at home also. He still couldn't have it more than a hundred yards from him, however, or it would just show up around his waist again.

After a few minutes of slow and careful walking, the group came across the same snake skin that they had before and Hermione stared in shock. "That's the size of the snake you fought?" She asked incredulously.

"No," Harry said distractedly.

"Oh, good," Hermione mumbled as they passed it. The others remained quiet since Harry was still listening for other snakes, but Luna quirked an eyebrow. This snake skin appeared very old and decayed, so was probably smaller than the actual snake.

They passed the cave in that they had been forced to clear so Harry could get Ron and they could fly out with Fawkes and made it to the large door that was the final entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. §Open,§ Harry hissed, causing the snake on the door slither about before the door unlocked and opened.

As they entered, the smell of stagnate water and more slime assaulted their senses and the many lights in the room lit automatically, causing the large room to illuminate, along with the basilisk that was now confirmed to be much, much larger than the remains of the shed skin.

Hermione and Ron instantly shrieked and took cover behind Harry and Luna, respectively.

"It's already dead," Harry said, noting the large head of Salazar Slytherin was still as it had been before, but that the mouth was currently closed. He could vaguely recall it and the door to the room itself having been open when he left, so he assumed they closed automatically since the lights had been on as well, but were off when they returned.

"You fought that!" Hermione shrieked once again, this time being able to see exactly what had happened. Since Harry had stabbed the snake in the roof of the mouth and it had gone into the beast's brain, she was unable to see the hole from the outside, but she could see a long trail of dried blood around the creature's head and splatters and smears along the ground and knew Harry's story was honest, even if it was severely toned down as it now appeared to have been. "Are you insane!"

"Hey!" Ron shouted indignantly. "That was my sister he was savin'!"

"That's not what I meant, Ron," Hermione huffed. "I just can't believe he fought a snake that is taller than we are by almost half and easily sixty feet long!"

Both Luna and Myrtle were already close to the giant serpent and examining it curiously before the blonde piped in. "It's remarkably preserved," she called out. "I am very surprised it held out for two months without any signs of decay."

"None?" Hermione asked, her frustrations with Harry set aside for the moment. "There should at least be some. Decay sets in as soon as the body dies."

"It doesn't smell like death in here," Harry said, sniffing the air experimentally.

Ron looked up from the massive black splotch on the floor where he knew Harry had stabbed the diary to save his sister with a look of confusion and revulsion on his face. "You can smell death? That's weird, mate. Really weird."

"He means decay, Ron," Hermione grumbled as she looked over the snake. "She's right, Harry. There's nothing to show it died two months ago. Aside from the dried blood, it looks like you killed it only hours ago. I wonder why," she ended, muttering mostly to herself.

"It's like I mentioned," Luna said, smacking the side of the dead beastie with her palm. "The basilisk's hide is highly resistant to magic, but it's the magic of the creature itself that makes it so. Simply put, even in death, the basilisk was so infused with magic that the magic keeps it in the best shape it can until it can't any longer and then begins to decay. That's what makes magical rendering so difficult with them and any other magically resistant creature. The more powerful, the more difficult. Our biggest consolation is that the less magic in its hide now, the less it will resist our attempts, but it also means it's weaker than if we had obtained the hide while fully fresh and at its most magical. From what I can tell, it would last a couple of years though, so it's still very good hide."

Harry looked at the snake as Myrtle lost interest and began to roam the room, looking about, but listening in. She found it interesting that she couldn't phase through the walls. "Would you be able to test if it can be rendered magically?" He asked.

Nodding, Luna pulled her wand from behind her ear. "I'll try to remove its teeth and see what happens. They tend to be the least resistant," she said, moving to the front and pointing her wand straight at the open mouth. "Amoveo!" She said loudly, concentrating a good portion of her magic into the spell, knowing it would take a large amount if she was to succeed at all. The teeth wiggled, but didn't budge beyond that.

"I'm sorry," Luna said. "I used as much as I safely could in the one spell, but it didn't help."

Harry nodded, curious as he had watched her carefully. "It's okay. You said it would be resistant. There aren't any wand movements? You just say the word and point your wand?" He asked, thinking he would try himself.

"And picture what you want removed and where you want them to go, yes," Luna admitted as the others watched carefully, looking to get a lesson out of the deal, though Ron was getting bored quickly.



He had been hoping to explore, but there was nothing to explore down there. It was more because Harry had mentioned sharing the gold from selling it that had him there for now. Harry planned to split it between himself, Ron and Ginny for their parts, Hermione for finding out the information for them and Luna for helping with the harvesting, but he was getting bored very quickly.

Harry nodded and stood in front of the snake, picturing the teeth coming out and laying on the floor in front of him as he called out, "Amoveo!" Again, the teeth wiggled, much more violently than Luna had managed with him using much more power, but still not coming out. Frowning, Harry pushed power into the spell rather than letting it draw itself out as needed and cast the spell again.

The teeth all broke off cleanly and landed in a neat pile by his feet as he smirked in triumph. "That worked," Harry said with a smile.

Luna didn't let her thoughts show on her face, but once again, she knew Harry used much more power than she had, but she had not been able to feel it as she normally could when magic was used around her. The same thing happened the night before when he summoned her wand for her. She had felt it when he cast a Patronus. Not the effects of the Patronus, as she was sure everyone had felt that when near by, but the initial release of magic had washed over her as well.

Deciding to think over the matter later, Luna got everyone's attention again. "The rest is about the same, but it can be rather messy and you may not like what you see from it."

"Messy?" Hermione asked with a quaver in her voice. She didn't like gore and blood. "How messy are we talking about?"

Luna shrugged. "It depends on the person. Harry has an unnaturally strong connection to his magic and got the teeth cleanly, so I suspect not by much, but harvesting will certainly look rather gruesome."

"Well, let's get started," Harry called out in false happiness.

Hermione turned green.

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Four hours. It took four long, disgusting hours to get what they could of the huge snake rendered down into its base parts and put into vials and under stasis charms. The hardest part had been the skin. Luna had been sincere when she said it was magically resistant. Harry had to release four percent of his magical reserves to open the carcass up and five percent just to have enough power to preserve the skin so it wouldn't rot on them later.

He had almost lost control over himself at five percent, unfortunately. It would still take time to learn to use more of it.

"I never realized how happy I could be to not be able to smell anything anymore," Myrtle said as she drifted above Harry, Hermione and Luna and stared at their dirty and smelly clothes. Slime from the stones and little bits where rendering hadn't gone exactly perfect and sprayed them with little blobs of detritus when something would burst covered them all.

Ron had left after the skin had been removed and was saved the trouble of clean up, though he had left a rather pungent gift of his breakfast in the corner of the room.

Three sets of weary eyes glared at the ghost who looked sheepish to realize she had spoken out loud. It wasn't her fault! She had almost fifty years of being able to say and do anything without anyone hearing her, much less dealing with another's feelings.

"Dobby," Harry called out, getting the jittery elf to pop in to him, looking disheveled and his clothing slightly dirty.

"Yes Master Harry?"

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked, looking at Dobby's clothes. The elf was wearing wee little cargo pants with stuffed pockets and a shirt and vest, both of which had other pockets, but not nearly quite as stuffed with various do-dahs.

"Dobby be good, Miss Hermione. What can Dobby be doing?"

"Can you take that pile of basilisk skin and store it at Potter Manor? I can't shrink or transfigure it using as much power as I'm able to," Harry explained.

Dobby nodded and rushed to do as he was asked, disappearing in a loud pop with the large pile of skin.

"He didn't even ask where you got that much basilisk skin?" Hermione wondered aloud, rather surprised that the little elf just walked up to a pile of skins that had to weigh roughly a tonne, and pop away like it was an every day event.

"House elves are trained from birth not to question their masters," Luna explained. "Harry could have told him to dispose of a large pile of dead, human bodies and he would not have batted an eyelash, though I didn't really see any on him," the blonde pondered, looking like she was trying to solve a major puzzle. "I wonder if house elves lick their eyes like lizards."

Hermione blinked owlishly at the quirky blonde, actually now wondering the same thing, while Harry scourgified the three of them and vanished the remains of the carcass, which took four attempts before he got it all. Hermione enjoyed talking to the younger girl, but sometimes, she said the most abnormal things.

"I'm pretty sure I've seen him blink before," Harry said as he tried not to smell himself, "but I think we should all go for a shower."

"Agreed," both girls said, scowling at their own clothes.

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Marietta Edgecombe growled as she saw one of the first year girls playing dress-up with one of those tiny fur creatures that seemed to always be around her, Cho and Mandy. For whatever reason, the three girls realized that they were always in the company of at least one of the little creatures and, even worse, all three girls had awakened to find that they had notes stuck to their bodies with terms like 'trust', 'friendship', 'honesty' and 'integrity' and their definitions. As if someone thought a Ravenclaw didn't know what those words meant! Ha!

"Why do those things always seem to be watching us?" Mandy Brocklehurst whined as Cho Chang sat across from the other two.

"I don't know," the pretty Chinese girl said. "I've spoken to Professor Flitwick, but he says they've only been able to charm the showers to keep them out. They're able to gain entry into any other place of the castle so far. He didn't explain why, just that the only place Dumbledore would authorize was where we would be naked."

"What about dressing in the dorms?" Marietta asked with an eye roll.

"They don't exactly peek on us," Mandy said. "They're just always around." She didn't know why Marietta was so angry with the little critters. They were cute and cuddly.

"I'm wondering if they're the ones who released Loony from the closet," Cho muttered quietly so only the other two could hear. Along with every Thundercat in the room with their enhanced, cat-like hearing. Especially the ones hidden under their chairs.

"They couldn't have," Mandy hedged, unsure of threatening the older girls' knowledge. Cho and Marietta had taken her under their wing and, after proving she really wanted to join their clique by flashing a boy two years older when she met them the year before, had allowed Mandy the opportunity to join them whenever not in classes and was willing to help with the more difficult classes and practical side of them. "I haven't seen them ever use magic and they're way too short to reach the handle, to say nothing of the locking charm we used."

"You can't do this!" The three girls who were talking looked over to one of the Thundercats who was trying to crawl his way out of a giggling first-year's arms while her evil little friend held up a frilly pink dress with a good number of petticoats beneath it in one hand and a matching pink bonnet in the other. "I'm a vicious beast! I'll haunt your dreams and be the evil in your nightmares!"

"Yea, you're really vicious," the first year holding the dress said sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "That's why you've been purring in our arms and begging for treats."

"You'll rue this day!" The Thundercat squeaked out. "Well go on! Start ruining!"

The three girls turned from the pleading Thundercat and the two giggling first-years who were cruelly torturing the wee little fur

person with various outfits and Cho shook her head. "There's no way they could have helped with Loony," she said. The other two girls nodded.

"Still, they have been listening to us," Marietta continued.

"They've been listening to everyone, though. And they can't go into the showers if what Cho said is right," Mandy said, shrinking in on herself as the other two older girls looked at her. "I just mean, we could talk in there... not shower together." She blushed as she realized both girls thought she was asking them to do that again. It was bad enough the first time they thought she wanted to shower together.

The two older girls stared at the younger one until blonde hair caught their attentions as Luna Lovegood entered and went straight to the showers to clean off the stink of basilisk. While she had been thoughtfully scourgified by Harry, she still felt dirty, just as Harry and Hermione did and wanted to get a hot shower in before they went for lunch.

"We'll think of something," Cho said. "However she got out of the broom closet last night, she won't get out of everything. We just have to go with what we know." The other two girls nodded. None of them really had anything against the second-year blonde, but they enjoyed tormenting her. There was something about proving their superiority and dominance against a girl that just simply refused to conform to the norms of society that they felt was their duty to maintain.

An objective witness would see this mindset as the same as the Pureblood Extremists and their views on what they felt the status quo in their world should be, simply with a different reason behind their actions. To them, they felt they had no reason to not put the blonde in her place.

It had started off with three girls just teasing the lonely outcast, but as with all such things, it became worse as time wore on.

"Agreed," Mandy and Marietta concurred with the Asian witch.

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"What are you doing, Harry?" Hermione asked as Harry sent Hedwig off with a note he had just finished writing. It was after dinner and Luna and Ginny had joined her, Harry and Ron for some homework for their help in it. Well, Ginny needed some help, still feeling the affects of her possession the year before where her school work had suffered slightly. Luna just wanted to spend more time with them, which is when Harry had taken the opportunity to tell her about her personal password into the Gryffindor common room which had earned him a big hug and a bright smile while everyone else had been gathering their books and homework.

"Just sending a letter to Gringotts asking what they need from me for creating a will," Harry responded, getting a surprised squawk from Hermione.

"Why on earth do you want to know that!" She asked with her voice having risen slightly.

"Well, at breakfast, I thought about sending them one more as a joke in my head when I realized you may see some things in my head that may make you angry," he admitted, deciding that it was actually something that was very, very likely to happen. And he would rather admit it up front than hope she wouldn't find the naughty memories he was referring to. His luck simply wasn't good enough for that. "I'll be honest, I wasn't exactly just trying to be funny at breakfast. You have kind of been in a few dreams where all you wore was a tie and socks."

Because he was trying not to look at Hermione, he failed to notice her very red face that was rather embarrassed and, though she wouldn't admit it out loud, pleased. Not so much that he was thinking of her like that, or dreamed about her, as those were all natural things, but because it meant she was a girl in his eyes. And apparently, one that could be attractive, which was a fear she had held on to from primary school. And while some people had called her ugly or various names with a similar meaning, only her parents or well-meaning aunts or family had ever said anything to the effect of saying she was pretty.

Not seeing this, Harry continued to explain. "Anyway, it made me realize that, with all the crap happening in my life, I really should have a will, anyway. I've got a lot of money and properties and stuff that is probably going to go to a bunch of enemies or bastards, so I

really need to make one anyway since I'm the last Potter. I don't want Malfoy to get his grubby little hands on any of it, after all."

"Oh, er ...," Hermione cleared her throat and tried to calm down as his speech went from naughty dreams to the idea of him dying. How was she supposed to not think of those dreams while entering his mind, now? "Well, I don't like it, but I can see your point."

Blushing and thankful that Hermione wasn't drawing attention to his earlier comments, Harry nodded. "Yea, I figured it's best to be prepared," he said, while silently thinking, 'and I've apparently died several times in the past and don't have any more chances, so I had better make sure it goes where it will do good and make my friends happy than to people like Malfoy.'

"Are we going to practice our occlumency, now?" Hermione asked, wondering how this would work out now that she was thinking of Harry's dreams. 'God I hate hormones!' Hermione screamed in her head.

"Sure. Let's set these two chairs to face each other," Harry said, manhandling the large, plush chairs closer and across from each other so they'd be comfortable.

"What are you two doin'?" Ron asked as he was finishing up a game of chess with Seamus and caught their movements.

"Independent study," Harry said, wondering why he hadn't brought it up with Ron yet. He hadn't said anything during the summer because it wasn't feasible. Once school started, he hadn't really considered Ron. Harry hadn't meant to exclude the redhead, but realized he had been beginning to do so. 'Actually, in hindsight, maybe I did,' Harry thought. 'Ron left me and Hermione just before I came back and we were stuck together for a couple of months alone and we got on better than we ever had with him around. We actually ate better and made up more ground even though we were depressed about his abandoning us.'

Harry realized in that moment that he hadn't missed Ron at all since he came back and that he didn't really feel any strong sense of desire to have him as a part of his plans for the future. He and Hermione had been devastated when he left and they had talked about it and agreed that it wasn't the first time the redhead had

separated himself from them. The two of them had shoved him out of their minds and lives as thoroughly as possible and had been better off because of it, but both had felt bad that their friendship had basically been over when he left them during one of their most desperate times. Harry still liked the redheaded boy, not being able to just toss off several years of friendship, but the sting of that betrayal was still strong and apparently stuck with him.

"Harry was working on some extra things during the summer and he told me about them in letters over the time we spoke and I wanted to join, so now we're trying them out," Hermione explained, unaware of Harry's internal musings.

"What kinds of things?" Ron asked, curious to see if it was something he could join them in.

"Have you ever heard of occlumency?" Harry asked, deciding to bring his old friend into the fold to give him a chance to be his friend again. Even if their friendship failed because Harry wouldn't turn the other cheek each time he left, letting Ron know about this training wouldn't hurt anything since anyone who tried to enter his mind would know soon enough anyway. But he would sure as hell make the prat earn their friendships if he abandoned Harry and Hermione again.

"No, what's that?"

"It's a practice of mind magic that takes a few months of meditation, which is basically sitting still and trying not to think of anything and staying relaxed, to build walls in your mind so people can't use legilimency to snoop around in your head and learn your secrets," Harry explained. "I didn't want to send Hedwig such a huge distance during the summer, so I didn't bother telling you until you got back from Egypt, and by then, we were on our way here, so I basically forgot to bring it up, but I can give you the book we used if you want to learn how to do it."

"Er, no mate, that's okay," Ron said, looking sick. He didn't like sitting still and trying not to think and he certainly didn't want to learn anything out of a book if he wasn't being forced to unless it was Quidditch-related. "You two go ahead."



"It's a very useful skill to have, Ron," Hermione tried to tell her friend. "People can just enter your mind and take your memories or thoughts if you don't know this."

"I'd rather not try and learn everything, Hermione," Ron began as his face and ears began to pink in the beginnings of one of their usual arguments. Harry wouldn't have it, though. Hermione was right, but they couldn't force Ron to learn it, so it was a waste of time trying to convince him. And as much as he knew it could hurt them later, he didn't really want to include Ron into this. He certainly never planned on telling Ron about the future. And that meant he couldn't include him as much for the same reason, so there was no point in forcing anything. And definitely no time to get into pointless arguments that would only cause more heartache, frustration and grief. Harry wanted to help people this time around and try to stop things from going bad, but he knew from experience that you couldn't save those who didn't want to be saved.

"Enough," Harry raised his voice to speak over the other two, getting two surprised expressions as he had never broken into their fights before. "She's right, it's a good skill to have, but it isn't something you don't have to learn if you don't want to. Personally, I'm happy to learn it properly and am looking forward to it." He turned to Hermione rather than speaking directly to both of them. "Ready to start?"

Still surprised, Hermione nodded. "Of course." The two sat in their chairs and faced each other, trying to get as comfortable as possible while Ron felt an odd sense of unfinished business and a lack of fulfillment.

"Alright," Harry began with a deep breath. "You get to dive in first. You read the section on entering another person's mind, right?" He asked suddenly. It just occurred to him, really, that the first several chapters were about defending and defenses. The part for entering another's mind was several chapters in and, even though Hermione read quickly, Harry realized he wasn't sure how far she had gotten on her own with writing as she went.

"She's going to go into your mind?" Ron asked incredulously. "Isn't that what you're supposed to be stopping?"

"Yes, Ron," Harry said with a mild glare for the interruption, especially when he was hoping for a good answer from Hermione. "I am letting her enter my mind to test my defenses. I trust her to be okay with whatever she may find. Now don't interrupt us. We need to focus." Ron scowled as his ears turned red and stomped off to the boys' dormitory while Hermione and Harry watched him leave.

Once Ron was out of their sight, Hermione turned to Harry and looked at him curiously for a moment before shaking her head. "Yes, I read that section. Otherwise, I'd have asked about it. Ready?" With a nod of approval, Hermione raised her wand and pointed it at Harry's face while staring into his green eyes. "Legilimens."

Immediately, Hermione found herself in the same position in the Gryffindor common room, but Harry's body was now gone. Her eyes widened and she looked around quickly as she realized that all sound in the common room was gone as well and there wasn't a soul in sight. "Harry?" She called out, wondering what had happened. The book never said anything like this would happen! She was supposed to focus her attention and send herself into Harry's mind, but whatever happened had caused everyone to disappear!

"H-Harry?" Hermione asked again, getting up slowly from the chair and looking around as she shivered.

"Right here," Harry said from behind Hermione, causing her to shriek and spin around quickly.

"Harry! What happened? How did you get behind me?" Hermione asked suspiciously, not taking her wand from him, just in case.

Harry grinned sheepishly. "Yea, about that. I appeared at the top of the Astronomy Tower. I thought we might try doing this at Potter Manor and designed my mind so that you would appear in Gryffindor Tower if you ever tried this so you wouldn't have to worry about my outer defenses the day that we first met over the summer. It kinda defeats the purpose of testing those if you're already in, I suppose," he said, trailing off with a slight frown. There was an odd gold strand, much like a rope, going from Hermione's body and then out and up towards the sky and he didn't know what it was for.

"You mean you made the Gryffindor common room in your mind?" She asked, looking around speculatively. "The detail is incredible. How did you do that?"

"Er, most of it was actually drawn from my memories of the room," he said with a shrug. "I changed a lot of things, but some things are still the same along with some very nasty surprises for anyone who thinks that the whole place was all built subconsciously."

"Oh," Hermione said, eying the room with a new apprehension and wondering where those 'nasty surprises' might be. "You'll warn me if I get too close to a trap or something, right?"

"You're keyed in for the most part," he explained. "You can pretty much go anywhere except for a few restricted sections that I've created in the school that don't really exist where I hide the stuff I would rather no one ever know about or the stuff I don't ever want anyone to see that even I have to be careful around if I don't want to set off any traps. Do you know what the gold rope, light thing is for?" He asked, pointing to it.

Hermione looked at where Harry was pointing and then to him as if he were more than just a touch barmy. "I don't see any light or rope thing," she said.

"That's ... odd," he said, going over and touching it while she watched on. Immediately, he could hear her thoughts as she wondered both what he was doing and what he was talking about, letting Harry know this was the form the mental probe she was using had taken in his mind. Her thoughts were so rapid and numerous, however, that he pulled his hand away quickly and looked at Hermione. "I think I may be the only one to see it, I guess. But, I could hear you thinking about not being able to see it and wondering if I was okay in the head because I could. I think it's your mental probe the book mentioned. I was wondering how I could find a probe to defend against or use it to track back into a person's head when all I saw was you."

"Oh," Hermione said with wide eyes. She had completely forgotten all about that in the surprise of being in a complete mindscape. "Show me around?"

Harry nodded and held out his hand, letting her grab a hold of it and then willing himself to the top of the Astronomy Tower. Being his mind, he was able to change anything on the fly and, one of those things happened to be an apparition-like ability to take himself and anyone else anywhere he wanted to go.

Hermione immediately shrieked once again and grabbed a hold of Harry as a large, Hungarian Horntail eyed the two newcomers as it circled the tower in mid-flight and then took off with several powerful beats of its wings as both people were on the access list. "What the bloody hell was that!" Hermione watched the huge creature fly away and noticed a few dozen others in the air, along with other flying creatures while other creatures seemed to patrol along the visible walls around the school and outside of the defensive area. Hermione was also able to tell that there were a much larger number of gargoyles around the multiple roofs and free areas that weren't there in reality, meaning there was probably something dangerous about them.

"Hungarian Horntail dragon," Harry responded with a grin and holding Hermione in a firm hug as she looked about with increasingly curious eyes. "I've got a bunch of various creatures running around to help keep my mind protected: dragons, goblins, manticores, wyvern, acromantula, centaurs, fairies, snakes, squirrels, chipmunks-"

"Squirrels and chipmunks?" Hermione asked incredulously. "What are they going to do? Chatter them to death?"

Harry grinned. "They're small, cute and most people would think the same thing you just thought, so when they transform into twenty-feet tall, bloodthirsty beasts with fangs and claws, the shock may help slow them down to get caught."

Hermione gulped. "S-so, there isn't really a single safe thing in here?" She looked at the large telescope only a few feet away dubiously and pressed herself more firmly into Harry, figuring he was safe and the closer she was, the safer she was. And she really didn't want to think about what it could do or how it would do it.

"You are," Harry said with a smile. "You could walk right into a dragon's mouth and it would just sit there."

"I'd rather not," Hermione shuddered. Then, she perked up and looked around, not being so overwhelmed with events to recognize something very strange. "Hey! You created an entire mindscape!"

"Er, yea?" Harry said, looking confused.

"Harry, the book said you had to build up to a mindscape because you had to create the rules for it. It actually said this was a bad idea until you got good enough to support it! You have to have the strength to be able to force the person to follow the rules of the mindscape like gravity or not being able to walk through the walls. That's why the book recommended creating a strong vault-like defense and then building around it for multiple layers of defense!"

"Uh, I did," Harry said, confused. "It began to develop on its own when I gave you control over my defenses."

"Me? What?" Hermione asked, seeing Harry blush.

"Er, well, I'll show you. Come on," Harry said, leading Hermione down from the Astronomy Tower to take her to what represented the Headmaster's office. However, as they stepped into the castle, Hermione stopped in surprise to see an older Luna – Correction, make that four older Lunas, being led by an older and more matured version of herself, all of which were dressed in black robes with Harry's coat of arms and both smiled and waved at the two real kids.

"Harry? Why are there four Lunas and another me? And why are they so much older?" She was also curious about why he gave Luna larger breasts and made her prettier. She was pleased that her older form was attractive, but the blonde Ravenclaw had been made prettier with waist-length hair and a much more obvious figure in the robes. At least he made her hair much better.

"I trust you and Luna. There are also groups of the twins running amok and all of them have one of you leading them."

"Oh." Hermione wasn't sure if she should be flattered or a little freaked out, so she simply decided to go with a little of both, though more flattered than freaked. At least as long as the older versions of the girls kept their clothes on and there wasn't anything to say this was some weird fetish rather than just Harry working with what he knew.

As the two worked their way towards the Headmaster's office, Hermione was astounded with the amount of detail the school seemed to have in Harry's mind. In the real world, she didn't notice scuff marks or oddly shaped or colored stones as they existed here, and she only noticed them because she was trying to find things that seemed out of the ordinary to try and find his traps. But, she decided to catalog each of these oddities and check them out over the next few days in the real castle.

"Lora," Harry said, voicing the password to the stone gargoyle and bringing Hermione out of her thoughts.

'Lora? Who is Lora?' She thought with a slight frown, wondering where Harry was meeting all of these women.

As they walked up the stairs, Harry grinned at Hermione. "That hallway, even though it doesn't look like it, is the most dangerous one in the entire place. There are invisible goblins and it'll automatically activate a huge number of defenses on anyone not on my permission list, the last of which sends them into the acromantula nest I set up in the forest."

"What happens to someone if you hurt them here, or something ... er ... worse?" Hermione asked as they got to the door.

"I dunno," Harry said as he pondered the question. "I made all of the defenses to scare or hurt the person entering badly enough that they withdraw their mental probe, though some people are on an auto-kill list. I just figured that anyone trying to get into my head is classified as an enemy, so I wouldn't be gentle with them. You and certain others may get permission, but that's to make sure you don't get hurt while we practice and because I trust you and plan to ask you to try and break through randomly," Harry said as he opened the door into the office.

"If I'm allowed to have entry, then your defenses won't really try to stop me from-" Hermione stopped speaking and stared in surprise at the older version of herself she had seen earlier, or maybe just another one, that was staring back at her with an almost identical stare of surprise.

"Well," the Hermione clone said nervously. "This is awkward."

"You ... You're me!" Hermione spluttered. The girl in front of her was much like the other Hermiones she had seen, only this one was dressed in muggle clothing, very flattering muggle clothing at that, and her hair was far more tame than Hermione's own. And Hermione's eyes were invariably drawn to her doppleganger's chest which was much more impressive than she had noticed in the others, though they had been wearing Hogwarts robes that had hidden that feature quite nicely. Still, it began to make her wonder why he went through the trouble of making them older and having those improvements to their current bodies.

"Er, not exactly," the faux Hermione said, biting her lower lip in a way that Hermione knew matched her own. If she wasn't so sure they were in Harry's head, she would be worried about a time-turner accident. A very bad time-turner accident.

"Harry, why don't you give us a couple of minutes. It should be kind of interesting to talk to another me. She'll come down when we're done, it should only be a few minutes," Fake Hermione suggested, giving him a look that made him realize it wasn't actually phrased as one, but an order.

"Er, alright," he said, confused. "You realize you keep kicking me out of my own head, right?"

"We can talk about that later. Go on." The fake Hermione pushed Harry down the stairs and then crafted a small warning to alert her if he should try to come up and listen to them, then turned around to face Hermione. The real Hermione.

"Why do you look like me?" Hermione asked as the older her turned into an older Harry. A rather appealing older Harry, at that, who looked very, very nervous.

After what seemed like hours, but had only been maybe a half hour, Hermione traipsed out of the Headmaster's office and gave Harry a strange look with a matching smile as she took his hand and began walking him to the Gryffindor common room.

"What did you two talk about?" Harry asked, wondering what a part of his own mind, one that generally forced him out of his own mindscape, and Hermione could honestly have to discuss.

"Differences between the two of us, mostly," Hermione said. "Anyway, I was also told that all I can do is walk around and try to find things on my own or with you showing me. Since I'm on the allow list, nothing will attempt to stop me like it would an actual intruder and neither of us could be sure what might happen to me if we tried to see what would happen if I tried and you took me off the list.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling uneasy as the possibilities came to mind. He had purposefully set his defenses up to be as drastic and scary as possible, but anyone he felt he could let into his mind for practice was on the allowed his for just that reason. "Well, I guess we won't be trying that for a little while."

"Look at the bright side," Hermione said. "I showed up right where you wanted me to and haven't seen a single memory."

"Hey, yea!" Harry said, smiling. "That's true!"

"Do you know where everyone else should pop in at? I was already in the castle, after all, which made your outer defenses worthless for me."

"Yea," Harry nodded. "I set up everyone outside the wall except for you so far. Everyone else shows up in the middle of an acromantula colony."

Hermione shuddered.

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Early the next morning, Harry woke as normal and rushed to get downstairs so he could get on with his morning workout that Monday morning when he saw Twinkle standing on the couch and waiting for him. "You have something for me, Twinkle?" Harry asked, curious to hear about what his tiny little spies had found.

Twinkle nodded once, his silver eyes shining eerily in the low light coming from the fireplace. "Merely your daily update and incident report, Master."

Harry frowned. "Alright, let's have it. And stop calling me 'Master'."



"We have identified one other who participates in the thefts of Miss Luna's belongings and I have taken the liberty of getting her chest wrapping back and issuing the proper warning," the Thundercat leader spoke, ignoring Harry's confused expression and subsequent blush as he realized what the chest wrapping was. "The three who locked Miss Luna in the closet have not attempted to do anything serious yet, but are still planning and have begun to entertain the idea of hiding and plotting in the showers where we have been warded out of by the smaller human."

Harry recognized their description for Flitwick and motioned for Twinkle to continue.

"Beyond that, the three instigators placed a bug attraction liquid of some kind on Miss Luna's bed and several large ones attempted to gain access before we alerted the house elves and they changed her bedding. The ones attempting to get on her bed during the night have been captured and are being held."

Harry frowned. "Were any of them dangerous to Luna?"

"No."

Harry nodded. "I'll handle them, then. I want a full list of anyone who's pranked Luna and anyone who knew about the pranks in advance and did nothing to stop them," Harry ordered before looking at the tiny cat man curiously. "What did you do with the bugs you caught."

Twinkle's eyes and body shifted nervously. "We've ... eliminated them....," he said slowly.

On the first floor in a section of the school that hadn't been accessed in almost nine-hundred and fifty years, twenty Thundercats had the large beetles and spiders that had attempted to get into Miss Luna's bed tied to tiny posts stuck on the floor in the corner, every one of the pests lined up in a row as each of the Thundercats hefted recently-crafted weapons in the forms of bows and arrows, javelins or spears, tiny little throwing daggers and in one case, a plastic action figure from a Hufflepuff first-year muggleborn that had karate-chopping action.

"Alright men!" Claws yelled out, the elected weapons master since he was the strongest in an odd little quirk of the magic during their creation. He had also been the only one smart enough to go to the room of their birth and request basic knowledge on the weapons since they had not yet learned to use their claws. "We nearly lost two of our own against those rats on the second floor! We will become the greatest warriors in this land! No mouse or rat shall again defeat one of our own!"

"HAROO! HAROO!" A battle cry from the assembled cat-people as they hefted their weapons. The day of the rat would soon end.

Claws hefted his own sword, an ornate dagger conveniently pilfered from a Slytherin student who thought to throw it at him and missing by a good many feet, and pointed it at the bound creatures a few feet away. "RELEASE THE PRISONERS!"

Once freed, survival instincts kicked in and each of the bugs scattered and the Thundercats gave chase.

Harry nodded. "They're just bugs, but whatever you want to do with them, go ahead."

Twinkle released a relieved sigh sheepishly. He then placed a closed fist over his heart and bowed. "By your leave, Master."

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"Potter!" Snape snarled out almost as soon as the Potion's classroom door had closed, giving Harry an odd sense of déjà vu. It was Wednesday morning and Harry had continued his workout each morning, hoping he would get used to the new exercises soon. None of his Thundercats had heard of any plots on Luna aside from the run-of-the-mill things they had been doing, like stealing her items, and had been giving those back to her as quickly as possible so that she normally wouldn't even notice them gone, but they had been unable to find everything. They were only a hundred in number and the school was quite massive. And he had made sure five were always in the Headmaster's quarters or his office in case any information he didn't have before came to light.

Harry sighed and looked at his much-hated potions' professor. He remembered this day relatively well and had actually been waiting

for it, planning on getting the very start of his changes in as soon as possible just to see how everyone would react. "Yes, Professor Snape?" Harry asked, glancing out of the corner of his eye at Draco who looked positively delighted as Severus began keeping his promise of making Potions class hell for the orphaned Potter.

"Since Mister Malfoy is still recovering from his wounds, you and your partner will assist him by mixing his potion as well," the snarky git sneered. This would show the little bastard to be so much like his bloody father and try to slip in and destroy Draco before the boy had the proper amount of time to explain things. Both Potters had felt they could run this school however they wished and be free from reprisal, but he wouldn't allow it. He would keep Potter in his place in the pecking order of things. No Gryffindor held a place above a Slytherin. Not even the Know-It-All, Granger.

Harry's eyebrows rose as he mentally compared this to what he remembered happening last time. Before, Draco had complained first, but it seemed something happened to make Snape single him out on his own this time. Looking next to him to a fuming Ron, who was his partner while Hermione was with Neville and then to a smirking Draco, Harry decided this was going to be where it stopped. "No."

Snape's face immediately showed his surprise as he was denied his orders. "Excuse me?" He asked dangerously. "I don't think I heard you correctly."

Harry looked back at his teacher, noticing the scowl grow deeper and his body language shift to acceptance of a contest of superiority as the Potions Master had no plans of losing in his own lair. "Madam Pomfrey cleared him back to classes and besides that, Malfoy has a potions partner who can make the potion. I will not sit here and allow your godson the opportunity to pass through this class on my merits simply because either he or you feel you have the ability to lord over this class like some sort of royalty. I will not be brewing Malfoy's potion and I will not accept you attempting to force me to do so."

The majority of the class stared at Harry in wide-eyed shock that he had actually just refused the teacher's command while Snape's eyes betrayed happiness that he would dare even try. Hermione would have scolded Harry quite thoroughly if she hadn't been too worried about speaking up in the man's class.

And that said something about his cruelty that students only spoke when needed and never at the teacher, even to support him.

Feeling the entire class' eyes slowly move to him in waiting dread, Snape realized that he couldn't allow the Potter Spawn to get out of this without a fight. "That'll be detention each night for the remainder of the week, Potter," Snape said with a hint of happiness in his eye. "And fifteen points from Gryffindor."

Harry smirked as Snape twirled around and let the directions fill the blackboard for the day's potion, a simple headache relief potion used to make sure they didn't forget too much over the summer and properly berate those who did. He ignored the glares from his house mates, though he made a mental note to try and think of something to tell Hermione and Ron before things blew up on him, and then proceeded to make the potion perfectly. It was amazing how much better he did when he ignored Snape's ranting.

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"Bloody hell, Harry," Ron exclaimed once he felt he was a safe distance from the classroom and Snape couldn't hear him as they left their double potions class for lunch. "I'm all for sticking it to Malfoy, but even I'm not stupid enough to piss off Snape!"

"What were you thinking!" Hermione asked as they left the dungeons and headed to the Great Hall for lunch, immediately following the boys. "You were practically baiting Professor Snape to pull something!"

Harry frowned and felt honest anger well up in his chest at his bushy-haired friend. He had thought long and hard about the way things worked in Hogwarts over the summer along with what he knew of various people from things that they had done in his past, but the current future, and had decided things had to change here if they were going to change anywhere. Snape had basically raped Harry's mind, keeping him open to Voldemort during his fifth year and had killed Dumbledore! There was no way he was going to obey that bastard this time around where it wasn't necessary!

Acting on the impulses he felt, he turned to her and glared with angry eyes, making her stop and take a step back as she realized

he was honestly angry with her. That ... had never really happened before. "Are you telling me I should do additional work to help Draco's Potion's grade when we're about as far from friends as you can get just because he has a few scratches on his arm even though Madam Pomfrey had already cleared him for classes?"

Hermione swallowed and found herself unable to look away from Harry's gaze as she responded, wondering where the sudden anger had come from. "W-well, no. But, Professor Snape told you to-"

"He told me to help someone who didn't need the help because it gave Malfoy a free pass for the day and caused me extra work," Harry said harshly, more harshly than he probably intended. "You can't deny the fact that since day one, literally since day one, he's singled me out and caused problems, can you?"

Hermione shook her head, having thought about that herself on a few occasions when it came to thinking of Harry's life in general, but still found herself unable to escape his green eyes. "No," she said quietly, somehow feeling very, very small.

"Snape is a bad teacher," Harry said simply, but firmly. "He assigns detentions and takes points for invalid reasons and punishes students for nothing. In first year, he even took one of my books just like a standard school bully. He's taken points from you for being a 'know-it-all' and from Ron for 'breathing too loudly'. He has called you insulting names, Hermione, he has called me names, along with the majority of the Gryffindors in that class! He allows others to sabotage potions and does nothing to stop it!"

Harry ran his hand through his hair and sighed, looking between Hermione and Ron and letting Hermione feel free of his eyes and their hold for the first time, allowing her to really think. "Hermione, Snape gets away with things like that and he keeps going further with it, seeing what he can and can't get away with. He's doing the same with Malfoy, letting him get what he wants and spoiling him like a little brat. It has to stop."

Hermione looked away from Harry and thought for a few moments while Ron decided to speak up. "You've still got detention for it, mate. So, I'd say he's still getting what he wants."

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going," he told them.

"What!" Hermione squawked. "You'll get in trouble if you don't go! You can't not go to detentions and then expect to get out of it freely!"

"He'll try, but I'll take care of it."

Hermione huffed, feeling more confident now that she wasn't locked under his angry glare and that Harry was acting like ... well, like Malfoy! "Harry, you can't stage a coup against the staff! You have to serve the detention and stop trying to overthrow their authority!"

The feelings of anger and frustration in Harry were too strong for him to just simply ignore, so he shook his head and sighed angrily, causing it to come out more like a growl. "I'm not really hungry. I'll see you guys in DADA." Then he left to head off to the Room of Requirement, but the path was the same for the Gryffindor common room, so Hermione and Ron assumed that was where he was heading.

Hermione stood there silent and still, trying to figure out why Harry had become so angry. Yes, she had told Harry he had to follow Professor Snape's orders and serve the detention, but everything he was planning to do could very easily backfire on him and get him into an extreme amount of trouble, or even worse, expelled. She knew it was a bad habit and came off bossy and nagging, but she didn't want to be here without her friends. She had planned on owling her parents and asking them to pull her out after those hurtful comments her first Halloween there and would have, too, if Harry hadn't shown that he didn't completely hate her by coming for her when he knew she was alone. Even after seeing the troll and finding out helping her would be a life-threatening situation, he still stuck it out and saved her.

She couldn't let him get hurt if she could help it, even if it meant that he did end up hating her. At least she would have tried helping him and, if he were alive to hate her, then at least there would be that.

Sadly, Ron was thinking very differently than she was and rounded on her as they walked down the hallway. "You've just got to stick your nose into everything," he said angrily. "Harry can get away with all sorts of things because he's the Harry Potter! McGonagall and Dumbledore both think of him as a favorite, so he wouldn't get in trouble."

"Ron!" She exclaimed loudly. "He can get into serious trouble for this or even expelled! If he's not going to think things through, then we should to ensure we can help him!"

"I'm just saying, they won't expel Harry," Ron argued as they entered the Great Hall. "He's the Boy-Who-Lived. Everyone wants him!" As he saw Luna sitting in the same spot as she, Hermione and Harry had been sitting the past few days, he began to redden as jealousy and a little anger filled him. Harry hadn't exactly been excluding him, but he had been consorting with her lot and hadn't paid any attention to the fact that Ron didn't want her anywhere near them. She was absolutely barmy! And Harry hadn't even played chess with him once.

Instead of sitting with Hermione, he decided to go ahead and sit with Dean and Seamus again as Hermione took a seat next to Luna, looking as depressed as she felt, which Luna immediately picked up on. "Hermione? Are you okay?" She set her fork down to give the brunette her full attention as several Thundercats laid sprawled out on the ground around her feet, each with an arm full of her lunch and mewling or purring happily as they ate. Their Master Harry's female was their favorite! She always gave them so much food! Except for her pudding ... she had become rather violent when they went for that...

"Harry and Ron are mad at me," Hermione said as she picked out some food for her plate and began to eat, tasting the metal of the fork and not the food itself. It was odd how depression could deaden the taste of food.

Luna frowned while glancing at the redhead down the table a short ways. "Ronald gets upset for the smallest of things. He always has, especially if he feels inferior for whatever reason. But why would Harry be upset?"

Hermione swallowed the bite of bread and explained what had just happened while Luna listened patiently and without interruptions. Once done, the blonde quirked an eyebrow. "I don't mean to rub wounds, but I would have to say it sounds as though you're missing something."

Hermione blinked in teary-eyed confusion. "What?"

Luna turned back to her food and pondered while trying to find patterns in the plate. "Harry ... is someone I trust. In action and word," she told Hermione quietly. "There is something different about him recently that makes him far different than anyone else I have ever met or come across. And it sounds like he has information of some sort that makes him feel what he is doing is both the right thing, which I agree with, and something he can honestly do, which I am willing to believe in simply because of who he is. Not as the Boy-Who-Lived, but because he is Harry. He seems to have found goals to attain over the summer that lead somewhere that he wants to go. I don't know what those goals are yet, but I suspect they are important for him to defy Professor Snape."

Hermione nodded to herself, her thoughts drifting to the talks she and Harry had shared in the past. "He does have things he wants to talk about. That's why we're learning occlumency, because he said that we can't risk anyone taking the information out of our heads with legilimency," she explained idly, not really thinking. Almost immediately, her eyes widened and she covered her mouth as she looked at Luna in fear.

Luna simply smiled serenely. "I already assumed something along those lines. And I know I'm not nearly as close to the two of you as you are to each other, so I know I won't be privy to the majority of your secrets. So don't worry, I'm not upset."

Hermione winced, feeling bad that Luna realized they were keeping secrets, and even worse that the blonde girl was accepting it without batting even an eyelash. She had quickly grown fond of the quirky girl. She was very, very, VERY odd, but some how, Hermione just didn't want to not be her friend. In another life, if she didn't have a better understanding of why Luna was the way that she was, then she may have been like many of the others, but that wasn't this life. "It isn't ... I mean, we don't want ... AH!" Hermione growled out. "I don't know how to say this. They're Harry's secrets and I don't know who he wants to tell or not. I didn't mean to bring them up."

"It's okay," Luna said as she began to eat. "We've only really known each other a week. You always seem to be involved in something that requires secrecy and I understand it would take time to develop a sense of trust between us."



'Still,' Hermione thought, 'it feels wrong.'

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Harry sent an overpowered blasting charm into the center of a massive number of statues that were put there by the Room of Requirement for him to destroy to vent his frustrations. It actually had less to do with Hermione's scolding and more to do with the fact that it could have easily stopped the whole thing if she knew exactly how bad things had wound up getting in his past life and their current future, but frustrated him to no end that he was the only one who knew.

A number of the students had turned against the school in the future, and it could very easily have been because of how much they were allowed to get away with while there at Hogwarts. Not to mention how many students had suffered because people like Snape and Malfoy were given free reign to act as badly as they wanted, making open threats in the Great Hall and not getting in trouble for sending hexes at students. Snape had had the effrontery to laugh at Hermione's expense in fourth year when Draco had cursed Hermione, after all, and there had been nothing done about that. The bastard had even had the gall to mock her!

The part that was actually the most upsetting, however, wasn't even the subject matter, but that his anger had gotten the better of him and made him speak so harshly to Hermione. It was how he may have acted when he was younger rather than older, and he wasn't able to predict his own actions. He seemed to think like his older self, but still reacted like his younger when any actions weren't consciously thought through or he acted based on his emotions and not with a clear head. Basically, all of his instincts were muddled up. He either became the leader in the war he was before his death, or he acted like the petulant child he embarrassingly had been at this stage in his life.

Yes, he was upset that Hermione knew what Snape was doing was wrong and still thought he should obey the death eater's orders, but was more upset at the fact that he couldn't determine for sure how he would act later with serious situations. He had faced up against Dumbledore in a letter, but if the man tried to force his way face-to-face, would he revert back to his younger mindset? He had always felt so small and powerless in front of Dumbledore. And to top it all

off, he knew he would have to do that very thing when he didn't show up for his assigned detentions. Would he have the backbone to do so? Would the old man test his mind to see why he wasn't the pliable little weapon he had been grooming?

The room morphed into a simple room with a couch and fireplace for him to enjoy once he was finished dealing out damage to the mass of statues and training dummies after an hour of doing nothing but destroying the various statues. It wasn't meant to train, but to simply destroy and vent his anger.

Harry fell back into the couch heavily as he sighed and looked at his hands, noting the rough callouses obtained through years of hard work, two years riding a broom and the past few months of exercise and tried to glean some sort of information about his situation in them, wishing for just a moment that he had the Sight and could use it to help.

The issue he faced now was not Hermione, Snape or the threat of detentions, but doubt. Going back in time had made him feel like he would be much more prepared for the things he was facing. Harry knew his intelligence was higher than it had been by this time in his past and he had made it through okay, but the sad fact was, he had only gone back four years, all of which he had slouched and slacked off aside from the DA during his fifth year and that was, sadly, more out of survivalism rather than the desire to do good. He was woefully under-prepared for everything he was facing.

Then he met Lora who gave him training aids, and then gave him another chance. But that was the thing that was hitting him the hardest. He knew he had already had multiple chances. Harry knew that he wasn't really at fault for all of his premature deaths, since Lora had specifically stated that there were other circumstances, but he had died, which meant he could die. And this was his last chance to set things to right.

And he doubted his ability to do that.

A major problem with the wizarding world was their structure of beliefs and the way the government was run and by whom the government was run. As long as things progressed as they did now, the wizarding world would forever stagnate and destroy itself from the inside out like a festering boil. An apt analogy, considering the

evil that arose repeatedly in an attempt to control and dominate it. And Dumbledore, for all of his beliefs of the good in men and the ability to redeem anyone, had allowed it to happen, hoping to turn people onto the 'Path of Light' by being kind and gentle with them, which was the exact thing those like Malfoy and death eaters-in-training fed on to learn how to manipulate and how to push and push until they learned how to test their limits in any given situation. Sadly, Dumbledore and Snape allowed them to push as much as they wanted.

During the horcrux hunt after Ron had left the two of them alone, Harry and Hermione were sharing their bed as had become their habit for warmth and, while neither had wanted to admit it by the time of his death even though they had many close calls, they had wanted the cuddles as well. The two teens relished the chance to hold each other each night and talk like they once had in previous years. During those times, they talked about everything they could think of and Hermione had once told Harry that, from her first to second years at Hogwarts, she had made a journal of her observations of the wizarding world and all of the muggle inventions she wanted to make magical variations of like televisions, public flight and even television dinners that were held under stasis charms that the wizarding community could eat at home when in a rush, though that had come after hearing about the plight of many like Professor Lupin who had been afflicted with a curse or were considered 'dark' by the Ministry of Magic and thus, unable to get proper jobs, so that particular thought had been more of a community outreach program or providing very cheap food that could be put aside for emergencies.

But somewhere along the way, she had seen that her views and thoughts would go nowhere after finding out about all of the bigotry and hatred in the wizarding world and she had eventually given up on those dreams.

She shouldn't have to do that!

Harry remembered the events of only two hours ago with Snape that day from his last life and had planned to let it happen so that he could make a stand and declare that the change that needed to happen in the wizarding world would start right there in Hogwarts. If he wanted to keep so many of his classmates from turning dark or just letting the dark witches and wizards out there take control

without even a fight, then he had to start here. For those like Hermione who wanted to try to make the wizarding world a better place and bring it into the present and out of the past, he had to be able to get past this test of himself.

And that's what scared him so badly.

Harry had found himself reacting too much like his older, or rather, his younger, self from this time period, even though he had matured. Granted, he had become a mopey bastard, but he had developed more backbone and drive over the years from now to when he had died, and whenever his emotions got the better of him, he reverted back to his younger emotions.

Snape would attempt to get Harry to go to detention and would play to gain dominance in his potion's class. Harry knew this, and expected it. He even felt he had done moderately well against Snape and hadn't let his emotions get the better of him.

But then he had lost control against Hermione of all people! He knew she was looking out for him and didn't want him to get into trouble, but she defended the slimy bastard even when she knew he was in the wrong. After controlling himself for so long and then letting that control waver after class to relax, he reacted before he could control himself again, and he had probably hurt her feelings.

So, Harry would see if he could convert her to at least admit the truth and, if possible, he would do what he could to ensure Dumbledore and the other faculty would do the same. If not, he would take control over the school as sole owner and run it as the Founders had by the set of rules they had left.

He just had to get through the inevitable confrontations with Snape and then Dumbledore without screwing things up.

Harry heard the clock tower chime from where he was, assisted by the room to ensure he heard it, and got up to go to Defense Against the Dark Arts where, hopefully, nobody would ask where he was. He just didn't know how to tell them that he was planning on starting a revolution in Hogwarts, hoping it would lead forward to the war itself so they didn't have as many students turn against one another.

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Hermione stepped into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom early, hoping to wait for Harry since he never showed up for lunch and found him already there and standing at the back of the classroom since the room's center had been cleared for some inexplicable reason. Squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath, she walked up to him with her books held in her arms against her chest in an ancient habit ingrained from years of primary school as a defensive gesture to have something between her and the other person she was speaking to.

"I'm sorry," both said as one once they were close enough to speak normally. Both blushed slightly and looked away from the other before Harry decided to continue.

"Look Hermione. I know what you were trying to say earlier and, normally I'd agree with you, but not with Snape. I'm sorry I snapped at you, but Snape is a horrible man and an even worse teacher. He taunts and ridicules students, which we already know hinders learning rather than helps it, he mocks students, well Gryffindors, for potions mishaps and accuses us any time a Slytherin cauldron turns out wrong, takes points for no reason, gives detentions for no reason and doesn't really teach so much as tells us to follow directions from a book. I won't stand down on this, but I still wanted to say I was sorry for how I reacted," Harry ended sincerely. He felt he had been justified, but that he had gone a little overboard, and decided apologizing was the right thing to do.

Hermione let out a whoosh of air in a sigh and shook her head. "Well, I may have come off a little strongly, too, so I apologize for that," she said. "And yes, he isn't a very good professor, but he is a professor and we have to respect him for that.

"No, we have to respect the position," Harry corrected. "However, he doesn't hold up to the standards of his position and probably won't for as long as he is here." Silently, he added, 'which I hope isn't for much longer, but we'll see.'

"I guess I see your point," Hermione said, more to smooth things over. She knew he was right, of course, but it went against her very nature to argue against authority. And, after learning how much Lockhart had been able to get away with at the end of their previous year, she had finally learned just how backwards and bigoted the

wizarding world was. In that context, there was very little she could hold on to to be comforted in the new and unusual world she was now in, alone at that. Her parents were muggles and couldn't help her in this world. They didn't, in fact, have any rights at all. Aside from Harry and the Weasleys, and more recently Luna, she was alone and stuck with the things that came naturally and in her comfort zone.

"I don't expect you to change your view on what I say," Harry said soothingly as he wrapped an arm around her waist and drew her into a hug since she seemed saddened, thinking it was about his views on Snape rather than her moment of reflection. "I just ask you to look at things and make honest conclusions without someone else influencing you. Yea, I know Dumbledore trusts him, but my experience with him leads me to think badly of him in every way aside from his potions skills. I don't think he can teach worth a damn, but he knows his stuff. That's all I would give him."

"I admit he's not a shining example of what a teacher should be, but Dumbledore has him teaching for a reason," Hermione tried to defend herself.

Harry nodded. "Yes, and I know what that reason is, and it has nothing to do with the students or his own ability to teach. It's because of what he did during the last war."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, frowning.

"Snape acted as a spy in the last war, but it was never clear which side he was really spying for," Harry said as Professor Lupin entered the room, levitating a large wardrobe behind him.

"Hello everyone!" Lupin called out with a smile. After a moment of scattered replies as he settled the wardrobe in the center of the wall towards the far wall with the windows, he turned back to them. "Today, we'll be learning about the boggart. Can anyone tell me something about them?"

Hermione's hand was up like a shot and few others bothered trying since they knew by this point that Hermione preferred to get called on. "Yes. You, Miss Granger," Lupin accepted. She reminded him a lot of himself when he was her age. He had preferred to stay under

the radar a bit more, but Minerva had sung the girl's praises with an almost gushing enthusiasm that made him curious.

"Boggarts take the form of a person's deepest fears, but do not gain any additional abilities from those forms. Therefore, a person who feared a magic user would see the boggart turn into that magic user, but it would not be able to cast magic. Or a basilisk would be unable to kill with its eyesight. Regardless of the form they take, however, they dislike the light, which I assume is why you placed its wardrobe by the window."

"It is," Lupin said with a nod. "To be sure it will go there if it decides to run and hide somewhere or try to escape."

Hermione huffed quietly for being interrupted before continuing. "It isn't known how they learn of your fear since even the most accomplished occlumens still sees their fears when faced with a boggart. However, boggarts will gain various attitudes based on the forms they take, such as becoming wolves and turning feral or a person would be able to talk whereas the same wolf would be unable to."

"Very good, five points to Gryffindor," Lupin said happily. "Does anyone know what their real form looks like?" He was met with silence. "Anyone?"

"The books never said," Hermione admitted with a frown.

"That's because no one knows," Lupin confirmed. "As far as we know, they will take whatever form of the person who is closest, regardless of how far away they are. That's why I'm staying right next to it instead of letting any of you get too close yet. We have no idea where they come from or if they have physical substance. If you cut off a piece of it when it is in someone's fear, then the cut off piece simply vanishes."

"Has anyone ever tried thinking of something specific when confronting a boggart?" Harry asked curiously. "I know they can be charmed to be something specific, so is there a way to think of, say, a bunny and it coming out as one instead of what you actually fear? Going up to one of these things, I'd automatically think of it becoming something specific if I knew I was scared of something."

"A good question," Lupin approved with a smile. "But no. They can be charmed to become something specific, yes, but thinking about something doesn't work. However, using the defensive charm 'Riddikulus' while picturing your fear as something else meant to be funny will overpower its fear-inducing form and allow you to defeat it. Now, say it with me ... 'Riddikulus!'"

The class intoned as they were told and Lupin used his advanced hearing to detect anyone saying it incorrectly, pleased to note that none did since it sounded just like the standard 'ridiculous' as he then started up an old phonograph. He needed a reason to justify bringing it since he didn't want to get rid of it and couldn't afford to keep his old residence while he wasn't using it. "Excellent! Now, everyone line up and we'll try this out! Remember to think of something funny when you cast the spell or it won't work," their new teacher warned. He remembered being a kid and highly preferring practical lessons to theory and homework. This lesson was as much to gain some form of camaraderie between himself and the students while finding out how to gauge some of them to see where they stood for his ideas for lessons. After all, if he could teach a student how to defeat their fears, then they had less to worry about when they were forced to confront them for those who had standard ones like bugs, lethifolds and the like.

Although, with Harry's surprising ability to teach the Patronus charm, lethifolds may not be quite so bad.

"Alright! I've got some music playing. Let's let the first person confront their deepest, darkest fears, eh? Mwa ha ha!" He let out an evil laugh that was so over the top the others couldn't help but feel amused.

Except for Neville, who happened to be first and concentrated more on not relieving himself in front of the class. 'Why the bloody hell did they all get behind me!' He thought fitfully.

"It'll be okay Neville," Harry said with a firm grasp on the other boy's shoulder. Neville smiled weakly at Harry and turned to look at the wardrobe, taking a deep breath as Professor Lupin came up to him.

"Mister Longbottom, do you know what you're scared of?" The professor asked.



"S-pe," Neville mumbled quietly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that," Remus said, trying to support the nervous boy with a warm smile and grasping his shoulder much like Harry a moment before.

"I said 'Professor Snape'," Neville rushed out, to which the class laughed and Remus smiled.

"Yes, I can certainly understand that. A bit like a bat or grumpy wraith, that one." More laughter. "I understand you live with your grandmother, yes?"

"Yes," Neville said, but hurried to add, "but I don't want it to turn into her, either!" He ignored, but noted, the stifled giggles as Professor Lupin leaned forward to make a suggestion before stepping back and flicking his wand at the wardrobe and letting Neville face his fear as Professor Snape's new doppelganger strode out of the wardrobe looking like he was searching for the one who shoved him in there in the first place.

"Longbottom! You doddering fool! You've-"

Snape's look-a-like was cut off as Neville raised his wand and barely repressed the urge to try and stun the man enough to stutter out, "R-riddikulus!" Immediately, Snape's forward step stopped as he was pushed backwards and the look-a-like found himself dressed in a furry shawl, stiff dress and wearing a ridiculous hat with a large bird on it. The class laughed as the Snape Doppelganger looked around in confusion and Lupin motioned for the smiling Neville to the side and let Harry come up.

Harry was curious about what he would see this time and didn't want to repeat his memories of the event and not get a chance to see, so he had made sure to step behind Neville. Thanks to his lesson in the school-wide Defense Associate in the Great Hall, not to mention the awesome display of power, the students unconsciously began thinking of him as an authority figure and had noticed his desires and he didn't have any of the problems he had before of eager students hoping to line up.

This time, he was second with Hermione behind him since she had walked just beside him the entire time and as he stopped getting

closer to the Snape Doppelganger, the faux man looked up and glared into Harry's eyes and only Remus noticed the dark smirk before the creature became a swirling black mass that settled to the ground and disappeared, revealing an adult man hunched down and resting on the toes of his feet, dressed in robes of the darkest black that seemed to suck in the light and even wearing black gloves with a single, silver rune etched into the metal guard on the back of the hand.

As the man stood, the class was deathly silent as the green eyes of Harry Potter looked back at them, but these eyes were frightening to everyone who looked into them. This Harry was taller than the real Harry Potter, looking like the older students as the Harry standing before them took the Real Harry's pre-time traveling form. Only Hermione took notice that the scar was mirrored on the new Harry's forehead, striking in the opposite direction as the one she was so familiar with.

"Things to come are worse than they were," the fake Harry spoke in a dual voice of Harry Potter, deeper than what the others knew as his and in a female's voice that only Harry recognized, having heard it for the first time with his latest death; it belonged to Lora, his Angel of Death, but both voices sounded as if they were straining to come out of the same mouth, trying to fight for dominance and sounding scratchy, but the Harry voice could be heard somewhat better than the other, female voice.

Faux Harry's face began to shift and contort as an angry expression took over its visage and the body turned into that of Lora, the dark hair remaining just as black with the thinner strands hinting at its dark blue as an unnatural wind picked up and the clothes changed size to fit her frame and the voice was more female than male as it spoke once again. "You are bringing failure to your mission!"

Harry would later swear he felt his heart stop as his own face morphed back onto the creature in front of him once again and took a step forward, shocking the real Harry enough to drop his wand as he fell to his knees. "L-Lora? I-I'm not failing! I've been working hard!"

"You are!" The dual voice yelled out and the face shifted somewhere in the middle of the two beings and stayed between them for a moment before the Harry voice and face came forward again, both

slowly shifting towards the female as it spoke. "They will suffer because you failed them! They will die because of you! You are failing them!"

As the faux Harry stepped forward and yelled these things at him, Harry couldn't think. He couldn't remember that this was a boggart or that he was even in a class. His world had shrunk to exist only around himself and the specter in front of him. However, as it claimed that he was failing his friends, his fight or flight instincts kicked in and he raised his hand out of pure reflex and did the only thing that came to mind.

A small ball of light about the size of his quill tip formed in front of his open palm and shone brightly, making the fake him look at it in shock before the small ball of light erupted and a large beam of magic as thick as Harry was tall erupted forward and hit the fake Harry, causing a horrendous screech of pain to erupt as the force sent the now destroyed boggart through the wardrobe and destroyed the outside wall and windows.

As the students blinked the bright line of light from their eyes, jaws dropped as a large gouge in the stone floor and in the distant wall around the castle grounds and then the ground itself past even that showed that Harry's attack had acted like a large drill boring through everything it touched.

Looking down, Hermione saw Harry with his hand still outstretched and breathing heavily as he stared where the ... thing had been at. "Harry?" She asked quietly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Harry looked up at Hermione, noticing all of the students had taken several steps backwards from the two and swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry. I have to go." Silently, Harry rose and stepped to the doors behind the students who spread apart to allow him clear access. At the door, however, he stopped and looked at the wall with a blank expression on his face. Raising his hand, the students' combined breaths sounded as he sent out an unnoticed pulse of magic and repaired the wall of the school before turning to leave again, Hermione hot on his heels.

"Um, Professor? I don't think we have a boggart anymore," a voice said from somewhere in the middle of the students.

"Everyone, I want you to go to either the library or your common rooms and write a six inch scroll on boggarts. Dismissed," Lupin said, waiting until everyone had left before heading to the Headmaster's office. He would need to share this memory with Dumbledore.

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"Master," Twinkle called over to Harry as the bespectacled boy was noticed the next morning. He and the other Thundercats had tried their hardest to find him the day before, but Harry had simply disappeared and no one had been able to find him. His master didn't show up for dinner or sleep in his dorm room and even his bushy-haired female had become snappy at them when they tried to go to her, but it had been no use, since she didn't know either.

"What is it, Twinkle?" Harry asked with a sigh. "I'd like to get my morning workout done before Hermione gets up since she's probably going to give me an earful later for what happened yesterday."

"We heard the stories and one of our own was watching, so we know what happened. But I wanted to let you know that The Three woke your Luna from her sleep after the eldest put some kind of spell to make her confused and made her drink something and put her into a closet again last night."

"What!" Harry roared, his eyes alighting in an unholy fire. He unconsciously held out his hand and summoned the Marauders' Map, still on loan from the twins, his invisibility cloak and his day clothes, quickly using a switching spell to be dressed for the day. "Where is she?" He growled out, opening the map to try and find her sooner to see if he could shift to her until he found he didn't know that section of the castle and didn't know if she was in a cramped place for shifting safely or not.

'Damnit! The one night I let my bloody emotions get to me, they use to attack her again!' He yelled within his own mind as he followed Twinkle to the third floor and into some hallways that he knew hadn't had any classes for decades, at least. It was also the same hall where Dumbledore had hidden Fluffy for protecting the Philosopher's Stone. 'I swear, if that mutt is still here, I'm going to have some words with the old bastard...'

"She is in that closet and has been so for about seven hours," Twinkle said, pointing at the door that was next to the very same one Harry knew held the trap door.

Harry reached out with his magic to feel the foreign magics on the door as he asked Twinkle, "why didn't you find a teacher to help her if I wasn't available? Or Hermione?"

"Your female, Hermione, was fretting over you and this happened quite late where everyone had gone to sleep, her included. We were unable to enter any teachers' quarters because they've all put up wards to keep us out. The one known as Filch tries to kill us during the nights and we were unsure of who to ask that we felt could be trusted since most of her own House is aware and does nothing to help her. We know of few others we can contact."

"You couldn't wake Hermione?" Harry asked, noticing the silencing spell and a slightly altered version of the same fifth-year locking charm that seemed to dissipate after a set time, which happened to be only in time for dinner that day.

"We could have," Twinkle admitted slowly, "but for some reason, her familiar is not letting any creatures through into their dorm room whenever your female is in there. He ... is a much better warrior than we are."

Harry nodded, forcing the locking spell to break as he encircled it with his own magic and crushed it. "At least I can help her now. Thank you, Twinkle."

"I live to serve, Master," Twinkle saluted before disappearing as Harry canceled the silencing charm on the door and opened it slowly.

Harry opened the door and saw Luna shivering in the corner of the closet, sleeping fitfully in the fetal position with a bucket next to her filled with bile. He quickly charmed the shelves to glow softly and then went over to her, shaking her shoulder. "Luna ..." Shake. "Luna, wake up."

Luna awoke with a jerk as she scrambled against the wall, worried about what creature had awakened her and only stopped when she saw Harry before she grabbed her stomach and moaned, leaning over and retching into the bucket again.

Harry quickly reached over and grabbed her hair, waiting patiently until she was finished. "Luna? What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"Th-they made me drink Aeger Induco. It f-forces the drinker to become ill. It's m-made for when-" She cut off to dry heave a few seconds before swallowing and continuing. "For when someone drinks something that is bad for them."

"Let's get you to the hospital wing," Harry said, trying to help Luna to get up.

"No. Madam Pomfrey will question what happened and why you're out. She's b-bound by duty to report incidents like this to the Headmaster and things will just-" she paused to contain another bout of dry heaving. "Just get worse. It is designed to only last a few hours and I can already tell it is almost over and should be by breakfast."

Harry frowned and vanished the contents of the bucket and cleaned the air before sitting down and lifting the laying girl to rest her head in his lap. "Then you won't go through this alone," he promised. "Just rest and if you need it, the bucket is right here."

Luna was too physically tired to complain and sighed thankfully as he conjured a large blanket to wrap her in and began to stroke her hair. "Thank you for finding me," she whispered.

"Any time, Luna," Harry assured her with a gentle smile. "What is it with them and closets, anyway?"

He had meant it as a rhetorical question, hoping some pointless humor might make her smile, but she surprised him by answering anyway. "I think it's because they were so successful at it last year and they know I'm scared of small, dark places."

Harry frowned, imagining the things he could do to get back at them. "What about your wand?" He asked, feeling her shrug into his thigh. Shaking his head, he cast the summoning charm, just as before, and had to wait nearly a whole minute before Luna's wand showed up before he tried to hand it to her, only to hear her steady breathing as she fell asleep.

For the next two hours, Harry held Luna as she slept and plotted how to get back at those who caused Luna harm or knew about it and did nothing. This was beyond pranking. They had locked her up in a place she said they knew scared her and made her drink something that caused her to be very sick.

It wasn't until the early morning light began to come through the open closet door that Harry knew what he would do about it.

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Albus Dumbledore sat on his throne and watched the students begin eating their dinners carefully, noting how many of the students were watching for Harry to enter, as they had done each meal since dinner the night before. The story of what had happened during the first third year Defense class had made itself known to everyone by dinner and, having seen the memory Remus provided, he couldn't help but to admit that he was guilty of just as much craning of the neck and shifting eyes in look out for the young Potter.

Dumbledore, however, was worried about much more than the students. They saw this as a boy of great power having had some kind of fear that caused him to destroy quite a bit of property. He, however, saw much deeper than that as only he knew he could.

Harry's boggart turned into himself and some strange woman that Harry had apparently called Lora and there was some unspecified mission that Harry feared failing at. Something none of the others seemed to wonder was why Harry feared himself? Why did his boggart turn into another, older version of Harry Potter?

Dumbledore could think of only one thing: the horcrux in Harry's scar had provided the extra bit. The boggart had somehow picked up on the soul's fear of Harry Potter and manifested it like that, and probably spoke to the soul fragment rather than Harry.

But the girl! That was something else entirely! Dumbledore had seen the last good many generations of students who walked the halls of Hogwarts and memorized them all with aid of excellent occlumency training. There had been no 'Loras' come through his halls. That meant she was either a muggle, which was hardly likely as Harry had stayed in his family home during the summer, he was sure, or a

magic-user from another country, something even less likely than the first.

So, that begged the question: who was this 'Lora'? Why did Harry fear her? Was she perhaps a death eater he had met over the summer and eluded? A woman from his past that was muggle?

No, Dumbledore was very curious indeed and had plans of asking Harry to accompany him to his office some time soon under the guise of asking about damaging school property and he would find out what he needed to know then.

With his thoughts cleared, Dumbledore noticed the Great Hall was filled and most of the students had made it, including Harry who was already sitting at the Gryffindor table with his usual group of friends, along with Miss Lovegood. That had been a friendship Dumbledore hadn't seen coming. But, it did keep him from being able to ask the boy to his office right away. It was okay, though. He would just get Harry in the morning.

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Minutes into the dinner feast, Harry gave Twinkle a piece of his chicken and casually cast his magic to activate his retaliatory prank on the Ravenclaws. The fact of the matter was that they were all guilty. While a few truly didn't know what was happening, most did. And those few who didn't were protected while the rest were about to get what was coming to them.

A loud crash of thunder and lightning erupted on the enchanted ceiling and a large set of glowing, green eyes glared down at the students in the Great Hall before the dark, angry voice of Bolt came, causing silverware and tables to rattle.

"Fools! You who would harm the innocent deserve no pity! Honor! Value! Equality! These concepts mean nothing to you!" The voice roared as the angry eyes showed obvious distaste and fury. "For atrocities against those who do not deserve them, you shall be punished..."

As the voice finished, all of the heads of students from three houses turned to look at the suddenly very nervous and horrified Slytherins before screams were heard from the Ravenclaws. All of the students



whipped around to see the chicken bits on the plates and platters begin to move and form complete chickens. Or as complete as two drumsticks and the body could provide.

"What the hell!" Ernie McMillan yelled out as he leaned backwards from the possessed chicken carcasses.

"You have hurt the innocent," the voice rumbled, quieter than before. "Soon, you will remember that we are to do what is right, and not what is easy. Or you will be 'taught' until you do."

Suddenly, music roared to life from the ceiling that a few of the older staff and Hermione recognized as 'Flight of the Valkyries' and the chickens began to hop up and began to send roundhouse kicks to the three girls who had harmed Luna while others launched themselves at the students and began to beat them with clubs of corn on the cob. Even the section toward the top where a neck had once been found itself trying to eat the students' hands while one aspiring attacker tried to wrap itself around a student's head.

After nearly a minute, one of the smarter Ravenclaws tried a simple 'finite' at his attacking chicken, only to learn it made it grow and turned it into a turkey that gobbled angrily and chased him from the room, all the while, the others in the Great Hall stared in muted shock as their chickens formed ranks and marched into Ravenclaw territory to bolster their numbers.

Then various bowls of peas formed into auto-launch trebuchets and the faculty finally kicked into gear and tried to help the students.

That was when baked potatoes found themselves with whole carrots pointing outwards and the mashed potatoes formed large wings that sent them on an aerial assault to splatter against their backs until the students in Ravenclaw went into a full retreat and ran screaming from the room, followed by Ron who was holding to a drumstick like his life depended on it.

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[Author's Note:] - Sorry about the long wait. This should pick up a little as we go since this is only a week after arriving at Hogwarts and I am going to speed the timeline up soon. The final scene is not what I was hoping for, but sadly, was the best I could do. I wrote it

out a few times, but this was, unfortunately, the best thus far (my third attempt of seven.) I'll try to make up for it later with some twists that I don't think many of you would see coming.

After all, with knowing Sirius is innocent, we don't really have any form of antagonist in this year, do we? Well, we DO... you just don't know about it yet... But I do. ^\_^

## Chapter9 – Trust

Ship: H/Hr/L

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Several have asked about why Harry didn't react more strongly to Luna's tormenting, and that, plus clearing up the situation itself in a conversation between Hermione and Luna will take place in this chapter for those asking about it. So, there's less action in this chapter than I planned on and more dialog, but I'll try to make it a little longer to make up for it and the time between updates.

A challenge to readers is to try and determine how Harry's and Dumbledore's actions appear similar, AND why they are different at the same time.

Soulmates: I had a reviewer ask how Luna can be Harry's soul mate when Hermione already is. Please refer to chapters one and three (chapter three, 'Sow the Seeds', mainly) to get the explanation. I won't pad my word count to explain this again. This will be explained one more time around Christmas in the story, however, to answer that question, specifically, when asked by Harry (Chapter 12.)

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Lost Demon" by Angry Hermione (H/Hr – Mature, not smut, but there is a bit of sex. It is reasonable and with justification. Not just there for someone to get their jollies. A little darker. Not bad Weasleys, but antagonistic Ginny. Worth the read.)

xXx Previously xXx

Dumbledore, however, was worried about much more than the students. They saw this as a boy of great power having had some kind of fear that caused him to destroy quite a bit of property. He, however, saw much deeper than that as only he knew he could.

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xXx STORY xXx

Hermione stood in front of Harry the same night after the majority of the food in the Great Hall assaulted the Ravenclaws with her arms crossed under her still-developing breasts, a fact the bespectacled boy found himself noticing more often of late, and staring down at the fidgeting miscreant. Both were unaware that Snape was prowling the lower levels in hopes of finding the boy who was now missing his second night of detention and hoping he could catch the young Potter out and about rather than going to McGonagall who would keep him from punishing Harry as he desired. "And what, may I ask, was your reason for doing that to an entire House, Harry?"

Harry swallowed and looked anywhere but at Hermione, thankful that she had waited until the other Gryffindors had gone to their dorms or were off in their own little nooks to work on their own things so no one else was listening in, even though many of those in the corners were leaning in to try and hear. Even Ron had run off after seeing her anger towards Harry. He couldn't figure out what Harry had done to rile her up, not having seen his triumphant smirk as Hermione had, but wasn't about to risk getting in the way of her ire when he hadn't done anything to earn it.

"They deserved it," he said, finally looking at her. "I found Luna locked in another broom closet this morning, but she had been fed a potion that forces the drinker to throw up everything in their stomachs and they had taken her wand again. They know she's scared of small, dark places and they keep putting her in closets because of that. I didn't attack them all, just the ones I knew were aware of what's been happening to her."

Hermione frowned angrily. "Harry, we have to tell one of the professors. It isn't right what they're doing, but we can't just get back at them with more pranks. There won't be any difference between you and them if you do that and if they're forcing her to drink random potions, then they could make her drink something dangerous next time," she said, sitting down. "I know you don't want to, but we need to go to a teacher."

"I thought about that, but it kind of ties into what I told you before," Harry said, turning to face Hermione more directly and feeling safer now that Hermione didn't seem angry with what he did so much as the Ravenclaws for what they did to Luna. "My main reason is because Luna doesn't want me to tell anyone about it. She's worried about reprisal and the backlash. She knows that the teachers would work to protect her more, but the students will have to be pulled in to help and they would feel resentment to that end and the ones who got caught would want revenge, which the teachers and other students can't stop all the time. She also doesn't want to get anyone into trouble for what they're doing, even though they're doing it to her. I've had enough of people controlling my life 'for my own good', and I won't do that to her. I refuse to take that choice away from her," he told Hermione adamantly. He would protect Luna, but he wouldn't betray her like that.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, curious despite herself.

Harry realized he couldn't give all of the examples from his life, since many of them now hadn't happened. At least not yet. Not ever, now. Originally, Molly had taken his key to his Gringotts vault and refused to allow him to go to Diagon Alley and he had never been allowed to go anywhere on his own. Dumbledore had not allowed him to contact anyone during the summers after his fourth and fifth years to keep him isolated and unprepared when he learned the wizarding world was turning against him and the secretive headmaster hadn't allowed Harry anything to teach him how to defend against the slurs against himself and the constant abuse. Members of the Order of the Phoenix watched his house, also knowing what abuse he went through and didn't take protective actions and not a single person had offered to help teach him things he would need to know even though many knew there was a prophecy that said it would be him that defeated Voldemort and actively worked to keep him ignorant. No one had ever once asked him what he wanted and it always

upset him. He would not take that choice away from Luna. He would help, but he wouldn't go against her wishes.

"Dumbledore has done a lot to keep me ignorant of my family and the wizarding world, putting me with the Dursleys and not letting me know I could escape by emancipating myself and told me there was nothing he could do when I told him what they did to me when he knew otherwise. I could have even been adopted by another family if not emancipated, but he didn't want that to happen. Luna asked me not to tell anyone, so I won't, but I will do what I can to make them stop."

"Then why did you make the food attack them? If they force fed her potions, you have the power to have done something else to them; something that could have had a stronger impact," Hermione pointed out, curious about why his actions were so minimal in comparison to what he could have made happen.

"True," Harry said. "But I am hoping that little speech will be enough to make the staff begin to look more closely at students and see if anyone is being threatened or teased so I can see if they'll handle it and, hopefully, get students to back off by thinking they're being watched. If I go in and just start attacking the students, then it'll make a big situation that can't be kept quiet from everyone. I don't want to have to go out and start attacking students with a bunch of spells and hexes, but get the staff to see what's happening and fix it on their own, if they will," he finished, not looking to have too much faith in them. With as much as they allowed to happen right in front of them, it was quite unlikely they would raise a finger to help Luna. Harry would admit he felt Professor Flitwick would help, but he once thought as highly of McGonagall as well, and looking back, she had failed him and his friends horribly.

"That's a good idea," Hermione mused aloud. "Anything they find, they can see about taking the appropriate measures to punish them and you don't have to come across as a bully. Like you said, your prank didn't attack all of the Ravenclaws, just most of those from her year and above. I can't recall seeing a single first-year hit."

"They weren't," Harry admitted. "I only attacked ones I knew for sure had any knowledge of Luna's treatment and I won't become them because I'm not letting the innocent get caught up in all of this. And, I'll simply get worse as I go unless they learn their lesson."

"Just remember where the line is," she said after a moment's pause.

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In the Ravenclaw showers, that line was once again being crossed. "That crazy bitch had to have been behind it!" Cho hissed through clinched teeth to Marietta and Mandy. "And this bloody grease still isn't coming out of my hair!"

"But those eyes and that Bolt person was the one who was speaking," Mandy refuted, subtly eying the Asian girl's hair. Even when dry, it was shiny and looked smooth as velvet, but wet, it looked far better, causing her confusion over her attraction to the pretty witch to return. Only the fear of her reaction kept Mandy from offering to wash Cho's hair more thoroughly. "It sounded more like a boy."

"Which is exactly what a female Ravenclaw would do to throw off suspicion," Marietta growled out as she used a cotton swab to remove the mashed potato from her ears. "While I don't think highly of her, she is in the House devoted to the smart students." Wisely, they avoided mentioning Hermione Granger, the puzzle not a single Ravenclaw had been able to solve and a touchy subject amongst them since they obviously didn't have the smartest witch. It was obvious that girl should have been in their House. Not that of the courageous idiots.

"Whatever," Cho grumbled as she mercilessly scrubbed her head while Mandy watched her front side bounce out of the corner of her eye. "I say we go with a tried and true plan until we come up with something better."

"What did you have in mind?" Both girls asked.

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"I am sorry, Filius, but I do not know what Mister Bolt was referring to," Dumbledore repeated to the diminutive charms professor later that night.

"Albus, had they just been assaulted by their food, I would assume it as a regular prank, but that message the voice provided was specific.

Do you know of any students that have been getting picked on?" Professor Flitwick asked.

"I suspected the Weasley twins, but they appeared as surprised as everyone when it was your Ravenclaws and not the Slytherins attacked," Madam Sprout confessed. She, along with the heads of the other houses, were there to discuss Bolt's apparent attack on the entire Ravenclaw house. Since the attack was against nearly a quarter of the school, it was more serious than any simple prank, and had to be treated as such.

"Don't be daft," Snape sneered. "It was obviously Potter; a name referencing a lightning bolt, green eyes and obvious subversion of the rules. He should be punished."

"Oh grow up," Sprout snapped. "More often than not, it's your Slytherins who are picking on others; blood purity smears in the Great Hall, hexes in the halls and brutish behavior in general. I'm surprised the rest of the school hasn't formed together to show them the error of their ways," she shook her head and looked to Flitwick while Snape sneered in retaliation. "Aside from the odd vicious streak in the library, I don't recall seeing any Ravenclaws picking on anyone outside of the norm."

"Agreed," McGonagall confirmed. "They are generally cold and distant with Miss Granger, but not hostile. And Mister Potter would become rather dangerous if she were attacked in any way, but I doubt he'd go through means such as this. While I'm hesitant to say as much, he is more the type to rush in and start flinging hexes rather than plan pranks and remain subtle."

"Yes, my house has mourned losing her since the beginning," Flitwick admitted rather sheepishly. "But I would have to agree; if Mister Potter were the culprit, we should be glad it was a prank like this than an outright attack."

"Of course. Potter gets off free as a bird," Snape grumbled.

"We cannot even be sure it was Mister Potter, Severus," McGonagall snapped at the man before turning to the others. "Regardless, we must discover what the cause of this apparent retribution was. We cannot have our students running vigilante and taking the law into their own hands, so to speak."



"Your students have told you nothing, Filius?" Dumbledore asked, glad things were back on track.

"Nothing. I was told of a few incidents of name calling, but nothing of consequence. I did find an interesting event, however. Absolutely none of the first years were hit and three second years were left untouched as well."

The Hufflepuff Head of House raised an eyebrow. "It follows to point if we take the warning at face value," she said, noticing blank looks from the others. "Oh honestly, does it really take a Hufflepuff to see this? The warning was against those who apparently did something wrong and, from those attacked, who may have known something and didn't step forward. So, those who were not hit probably had no idea what was going on or were among those who were assaulted to begin with."

She turned to Snape who was half way to opening his mouth and interrupted him quickly. "Yes, it's possible it was a Hufflepuff, but if that's the case, I'll be quite proud of them if this comes to be the case." And she would, too.

"What about Mister Weasley?" McGonagall asked. "His chicken leg dragged him out of the Great Hall and he was covered in food when he returned."

"Yes, because that is so different from other nights," Snape mumbled, though everyone heard him.

"He held onto his chicken leg," Flitwick confessed. "I saw him after leaving and trying to remove the charms from the food and he was attacking and eating various things, but they still left him untouched, which leads me to believe they were all charmed for specific targets. Quite ingenious really."

"Magic which should be impossible for a third year student," Dumbledore said with a nod, hoping to lead away from Harry. Those kitty creatures were most obviously his as well, but they appeared true flesh-and-blood creations rather than a standard golem, and that should have been quite above his abilities as well.

He just wasn't going to say that to this group.

"He's been doing that Patronus charm, and even I'm not capable of that," Madam Sprout admitted. "Though, I have been getting closer after listening in to his class last weekend."

"That spell is different if his lessons are to be believed," Flitwick admitted slowly. "Still, I wouldn't put it past his abilities. I've seen nothing else to prove him capable, however, so I do not believe it was him." To the half-goblin and half-human teacher, these 'Thundercats' were not Harry's. They were friendly to just about everyone, save several of his Ravens and most of the Snakes. Being friendly to Harry meant little. He understood most animal life and they generally had an Alpha. Harry was, even to his own thinking, an Alpha, so it only made sense they followed him.

"Granger could have helped him," Snape pressed. "Which leads me to another topic. Mister Potter has received a detention from me for the last two nights and tomorrow and has not come to them. I am formally lodging this complaint and will see him tomorrow or he will be with me each night for the rest of the month," he told Minerva.

"What did he receive detention for?" McGonagall asked.

"He didn't do the work assigned and told me directly to my face that he wouldn't," Snape told her, not saying whose work was not done.

Minerva frowned. "Very well. I will ensure he goes tomorrow."

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Hermione sighed as she propped her pillow between her back and the headboard of the bed once her curtains were drawn closed and charmed to allow no sound in or out since her roommates were jabbering away like mentally challenged spider monkeys.

Their conversations sounded about the same, too.

"Not a brain cell amongst them," Hermione growled to herself, lamenting the loss of a roommate like Luna who could hold an intelligent conversation and could understand at least half of what Hermione spoke about. The bushy-haired brunette knew her roommates were not stupid and were good girls in general, but all of

their intelligence fell into line with social interactions, gossip, fashion, make-up and ... boys.

Until this latest summer, the subject of the opposite sex meant little to Hermione beyond eavesdropping on her roommates' conversations about it, though she preferred to call it 'observational study'. She had been going through puberty a couple of months before Hogwarts had even started and, being stuck around two boys who couldn't care more about girls than they would about what they ate for breakfast, she had learned to control her hormones well enough to keep her from pursuing that topic; and hopelessness about being considered 'attractive' had long since broken her of thoughts of any romantic entanglements.

Then Harry seemed to have shown an interest in her, occasionally flirting and saying incredibly sweet things that she knew were perfectly sincere. She had long-since learned to read the boy and, as odd as it sounded, she knew all of his littlest quirks that meant lies or misdirection. There had been none of that when he said those wonderful things.

It was really very annoying.

She had grown rather ... infatuated with the boy in their first year after he jumped onto the back of a rampaging mountain troll to save her life. It was, obviously, the single-most heroic and selfless thing anyone had ever done for her and it had made her feel so incredibly special, so incredibly loved, or at least that someone cared for her enough to risk their own life, that she couldn't help those feelings. They had shown up and simply never gone away or weakened from that night.

They changed.

What had started out as fascination with the Boy-Who-Lived turned into shock at their first meeting, to infatuation and a powerful crush after that horribly great Halloween, to something she couldn't really understand or describe.

From the very beginning, she had felt some form of connection with Harry that was so unique and unknown that she examined it, poked and prodded until she had discovered as much as it would allow her to. It felt weird saying it that way, but she felt that was exactly how it

happened. It was like there was something keeping her from learning more. She had learned to read his actions and expressions, learned how he thought and more about who he really was as time progressed until it had finally seemed to hold her back, keeping her from approaching him any further at some point about half way through their second year until after Harry had begun to flirt with her during the summer, whether he realized it or not.

It confused the hell out of her.

Whatever connection between her and Harry existed no longer felt restrained or blocked. That part of her that felt as though was a part of Harry, or rather, that he was a part of her, seemed to blossom and grow now.

Which made her current predicament so strange.

She had met a clone of herself, an older and more matured clone that she actually hoped would eventually be what she grew into, who was actually Harry's subconscious self. He had really been fascinating to talk to.

Apparently, Harry had given control over his mental defenses to what he thought was simply another Hermione clone, like the others that led the groups of other Lunas and twins around the mental castle construct. However, since no one wants to give up control over their own minds, it had been tied directly into Harry's subconscious mind. As such, there was a part of Harry's mind that was always focusing on his mental shields, always monitoring the defenses and the various creatures in his mind, always tweaking and adding to the world in such a way that it helped build his defenses even while he was not working on them directly himself, knowing what he would want and fine-tuning various details from memory, such as the common room.

Subconscious Harry had also explained that he was the direct reason anyone attempting to access the mindscape would be bound by Harry's rules to keep them from flying about or changing it to suit their own desires and Subconscious Harry was the direct connection to the allow access lists. A benefit to this whole thing was that, even while sleeping or unconscious due to spell, potion or chemical, those same defenses were still active as they were controlled by

something that could not be destroyed without destroying Harry himself.

Hermione found herself impressed.

The book she had received from Harry, regardless of how long it lasted, had not said anything like that was possible. And it wasn't that she didn't believe Harry, or his doppelganger, but everything he had learned, he had learned from that same book. He had basically said as much. The only reason she wasn't upset that something was different than written was because that kind of personified Harry's natural abilities. He made magic work for him.

There was also that rather large insult of a DADA professor the last year. It disgusted her at how she had found herself pulled into that man's lies. Especially when she had the perfect example of what a man was meant to be within her best friend.

Hermione let out an explosive breath and settled herself cross-legged on her mattress and stopped allowing herself to examine her thoughts again. This was not about her feelings for Harry, whatever they really were, or what she had learned from Subconscious Harry, as she had taken to calling him. This was to see what she could learn of her own mind in comparison to what she learned about Harry's.

She took a deep breath through her mouth and let it out through her nose slowly, having taken a more muggle meditation exercise than the one specifically from the book since the former had been proven to help meditation more than the wizarding version.

With her second deep breath, Hermione felt herself falling and lose sense of her body before there was the emptiness of feeling nothing. She hated this part. It felt like she was losing herself or dying. Like she was no longer a part of her body. She hadn't noticed it until now, but that feeling of being empty wasn't there in Harry's mind. She was able to feel him the entire time.

She had never once, even when crying in the loo on that Halloween before Harry's arrival, felt so alone as she did within her own mind.

Then she felt cold seeping into the soles of her feet and biting into her body and she knew she had arrived. Hermione opened her eyes

and looked up at the huge monolith in front of her. In this bleak, white, freezing tundra, this gargantuan building was the only thing in existence. Around for as far as the eye could see, it was a harsh winter with an arctic wind that already had her mental teeth chattering and seeped away at her own mental energies before she shut it down as soon as her eyes opened.

The building was a large, stone creation that had originally been gray until the ice covered it, causing it to shine like the snow crunching beneath her feet and was far more massive than Hogwarts by ten times. And the only way in, aside from blasting through the walls, was right in front of her with a small design in the covered ice that was so faint she barely saw it herself, even though she was looking for it.

'B-bloody hell,' she chattered to herself, even her own thoughts stuttered from the cold. 'I'll have to maintain this each night or the ice will cover my lock.'

She touched the wand that had come with her mental projection to the stones as if touching the points of a star, and then spun it in a counter-clockwise pattern to form a pentagram with the point facing upwards, causing the ice to shatter, several stones to recede and then shift to the side to open a doorway for her to walk through.

Hermione stepped through quickly, entering the labyrinth she had created in an attempt to cause potential invaders to not only take time to find access to her memories, giving her time to defend herself, but possibly get them lost so that she can possibly break the connection between her invader and herself. The book had said doing so could potentially lock the person out of their own minds until she sent them back herself by connecting to that person and then tossing them back, for lack of a better comparison. The book had explained it would be like removing a person's life line in the ocean to a boat. That person would be unable to connect back to their boat, or mind, unless she sent them a line to follow back. And like swimming, they could move, but without the power to do anything, which came from their connection to their body, they were stuck until help arrived.

After seeing Harry's mind, she felt perhaps it was time to add some fiendish guardians into her little maze. She felt there was a wonderful minotaur myth that would be apt in this situation.

She took each turn in sequence where she passed through a portal every five seconds since the paths changed as time progressed until she found herself enter a cavernous, circular room with several hundred arches opening into the sides every few feet into other openings that led into various mazes throughout the building that ultimately led to all of the useless memories she had planted in little bundles around the mazes with minor protections around each to make her invaders waste time on those pointless memories. Only a slight difference in the stones above each arch let her know which was the correct one to exit her monolithic building. Each level of every maze was also interconnected so that a person risked losing themselves forever if they didn't know not only the five-second timing sequence to step between each opening, but also which direction to walk in and when. Without that, they popped into different locations within the tower.

Around the room was a wide walkway that could be traveled to go around the room that was seven feet wide before it dropped off into what appeared as a dark abyss beneath. And then a distance of five hundred feet of that abyss was a floating gazebo approximately fifty feet wide with a huge mass of glowing, tangled ropes.

This was her Nexus.

This was the center of control over her mind. From within this place, she could control her memories and examine her life from the moment of her birth. She could control this world and all within it. From here, she was Queen.

A lesser, or narcissistic, woman would claim 'Goddess'.

Hermione stepped to the edge of the abyss and drew the same pentagram from before in the air and then shoved it forward, causing it to warp and grow to expand over the expanse until she was able to walk along one of the star's lines as a bridge, which disappeared the moment both of her feet were off of the glowing surface.

A nasty surprise if a more experienced mind were forcing her to show them the way.

Once across, Hermione stepped into the writhing, glowing strands that those with pensieves would recognize as memories and tipped

her head back while closing her eyes as she allowed the power of her memories and magic to flow through her as she began to experiment with additional defenses.

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Luna sighed in frustration after being enervated as the Ravenclaw entranceway slammed shut with three distinct giggles echoing down the hall. She knew from past experience that the knocker would be unable to understand her, hearing everything she said as simple gibberish or only names of creatures written about in *The Quibbler*. Sadly, waking up naked or with hexed clothing that forced her to strip within minutes just outside the door was common-enough an occurrence that it didn't even phase her anymore, though it was rather uncomfortable to spend the whole night naked and unable to keep the chill of the air off of her.

She got up and began her trek towards a niche she had created for herself the year past, but knew nothing was there except the ability to block off the drafty air and the area was small enough that her body heat warmed the space somewhat, though the stone floor and walls generally sapped that quickly enough that she woke up quite uncomfortably and always very stiff. She had attempted hiding a stash of clothing and a blanket there, but the innate magic of the house elves caused them to always find it and return it to the Ravenclaw dormitories. And most unfortunate, not having any control over them, she could not call them to request help or aid or get them to stop. Students were meant to be in their dormitories during the night, and they were not allowed to facilitate their stay anywhere else. House elves would apologize quite profusely, but still be unable to take any orders from a student, regardless of the cause.

But, rather than do as she had done many times before, Harry's offer during their study group came to mind, along with her own, personal password, which stopped her short.

She looked down at herself, sending her vision over her naked body and wondered if she could deal with the embarrassment of being seen by him or possibly others if Harry's dorm mates were awake. She wasn't normally embarrassed by her body and actually preferred not wearing clothes, but somehow, she felt a strange hesitancy to be seen by him and possibly judged. It confused her,



really. She never cared what others thought of her physical appearance, and still didn't, but he was different. Somehow, she felt she needed to be more for him.

It was hard for her to figure out why she cared what he thought of her. Most everyone else ignored her or were rude or simply nasty and he was nice. But that couldn't be it. Hermione was quite nice to her as well and Luna knew the bushy-haired girl's opinion of her body wouldn't phase her in the least, regardless of what it was.

So, she wondered what Harry would think and whether he would find her nudity disturbing or not and why it even mattered.

That didn't stop her from realizing that Harry was still the very best option available to her, however. With the cold night air, nothing to warm herself and soul-sucking dementors on the loose, her usual safety niche was basically out of the question. She would almost certainly get sick there, if not worse.

She quickly padded down various halls and stairways until she found herself in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady and gently woke her up, providing the password before the rotund woman could question her. "Moonbeams are the bridges to our dreams."

"Of course, dearie. Go right in." The Fat Lady swung opened and then closed as the naked blonde walked through before going back to sleep and forgetting the girl had even shown up.

Luna paused in the common room and looked to the girls' dormitories, wondering if it would be better to go to Hermione instead, but realized she didn't know which room belonged to the bushy-haired brunette, much less which bed. Therefore, realizing her choice was easy, she padded up the boys' stairs and to the third-year room.

She went to Harry's bed, thankful it was at the end closest to the window, and parted the curtains before shaking his shoulder to awaken him. "Harry." Shake. "Harry?"

"Hm?" Harry mumbled, waking up and looking to the girl who was shaking his shoulder. "Luna? Wad er you here fur?"

Luna couldn't help it and giggled. He was funny when he wasn't all there. "I was locked out of my common room and you gave me a password for coming here when I needed help..." she broke off hesitantly.

"Mmph," Harry grunted as he scooted backwards and lifted his blanket, letting the girl crawl in next to him. Several months of having shared close lodging and a bed with Hermione before coming back in time, and even though he had experienced three months since then, left him currently unconcerned with her state of undress or sharing his covers and he was sleepy enough to just take actions he remembered and that were nearly ingrained.

Especially when the girl in his arms was cold and shivering, much like his memories of similar situations were, regardless of how much more skin he was in contact with now.

He reached around her waist and pulled her close, ignoring her surprised squawk as he snuggled into the girl. "G'night Luna."

Blinking owlishly, Luna wondered at how warm he was. "Good night, Harry."

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Harry's eyes slowly opened as he woke up, only to find Luna's gray-blue ones looking back at him from only inches away where she was under his blanket and, from what he could tell, snuggled up against him in his arms. "Good morning Luna," he said slowly. "When did you get here?"

"Some time after midnight last night," she confessed. "I was locked out of the Ravenclaw common room again and didn't have my wand to keep myself warm."

Harry nodded, very slightly moving his hand up and down briefly just to confirm what he thought he felt, or rather, didn't. "And are you naked?"

"Quite," she said simply.

He nodded again. "Lemmie get you a shirt," he said with a gulp as he got out of bed and rooted around in the wardrobe by his bed for a

long shirt for her. Finding one he'd taken from Potter Manor, he turned to hand it to her and found her resting on her knees on his bed, completely bared for him to see and holding out a hand expectantly.

He spun around quickly so he wasn't looking at her and reached around to hand her the shirt blindly. "Er, Luna, not that you aren't very pretty, but I don't think I'm supposed to see that yet."

"See what?" She asked as she slipped his shirt over her head and on. It was overly large on her, but it helped to give it more length so it covered her lower parts.

"Your body," Harry explained with a blush. He knew the Luna he had once known was rather odd, but he had always believed that all women would rather not be seen starkers.

Fangirls excepted, of course.

"Oh. Well, you have, so now there's nothing to worry about. I'm covered up," she soothed, taking note that he had said 'yet'. It was a curious qualifier. But, his blush kept her from worrying about his reaction and she felt she had a long time before she really had to worry. Besides, he said she was pretty!

"Sorry I don't have anything that'll fit you better. If you want, you can give me a change of your clothes and I can keep them here in case this happens again."

Luna smirked at Harry's comment and the unintelligible mutters of Ron in his sleep. "You want a pair of girl's panties in your wardrobe? Aren't your own more comfortable?"

"I don't want to wear them!" Harry hissed out, horrified that she thought that. At least until she giggled tiredly. "Cheeky bugger, aren't you?" Harry huffed.

"Why are you dressing in shorts?" Luna asked after laying back on Harry's bed where it was still warm and cocooning herself in the blankets so only her face was visible. It was still rather chilly outside of the blankets, both making her wonder why he was dressing in something so short and glad that she had made the decision to go to

him. She'd have to figure out how to keep his toes warm, though. He had a thing for trying to burrow them under her.

"I started exercising in the mornings and am going to do that before I shower for the day."

"But the sun isn't even up," she mumbled groggily as she closed her eyes.

He summoned her wand for her while he continued, "it will be in about two hours, but you can stay here as long as you want. I'll be back before the others wake up and, if you need one, feel free to take one of my robes and change the size if you want to leave before then."

Luna yawned and mumbled her understanding as she fell back asleep, having only managed to get a little sleep.

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Harry pumped his legs as quickly as he could for the last half of his laps around the Quidditch pitch that the Room of Requirement created for him, furious with himself as he realized one serious flaw in his plan of pranking Luna's tormentors and hinting at their actions against his quirky blonde friend to try and teach them to stop.

They would think it was her. Or just simply take their frustrations out on her, thinking that she had something to do with their predicament if not just simply to vent their frustrations.

In a way, it was the reverse of what he was hoping for regarding the war that was coming. He had hoped he could start something there in the school that would continue into the rest of wizarding Britain to make things better, both in this war and after to try and keep it from happening again.

This, however, was going the opposite way. He was trying to get them to change on their own and maybe get the faculty to take action to stop it from happening not just to Luna, but to others, and it was now possible that what happened to Luna that night was escalation, or her tormentors just getting retribution. Luna wasn't attacked, after all, and had been on the Gryffindor table. To any

Ravenclaws looking for someone to blame, that was more than enough.

He growled as he came to a stop at his finishing point and rested his arms on his knees, panting for air. "I will not fail," he demanded of himself. "If I can't protect Luna, then I have no chance with this bloody war, angels of death be damned."

"Master?"

Harry looked down and sighed as his Thundercat leader flinched. "Sorry Twinkle. I just don't like what this thing with Luna could mean. What did you find out?"

"I understand," Twinkle admitted. And he did, too. He and the other Thundercats liked their master's females. "It was, indeed, those same three. We were not able to hear them plan since they did so in the bathing room, but by the time we learned of it, they were already doing it and then your Luna went to you. We would have brought you her wand, but it was locked in one of their trunks and we could not open it."

Harry frowned, figuring he would need to learn how to make something for them to do various tasks. He had seen their weapons and, as amusing as it was to watch, a karate-chopping-action figure was no deterrent to anything. "If it was locked, how did I summon it?"

Twinkle shrugged. "The wand came through a hole made in the trunk that suddenly appeared. Many items came out with it." The Thundercat leader refused to admit that the magic shattered the hole into the wooden trunk or of claiming the elastics from the clothing for their own pursuits.

They would soon have bows in their tiny weapon arsenal! Haroo!

Harry gave up figuring it out and gave Twinkle permission to leave which was promptly followed before shucking his clothing and diving into a pool that created itself as he dropped his pants. The best thing about doing this in the Room of Requirement was that, even if his legs cramped and he began to drown, the room could change the environment around him and save him. Thus, swimming became his

warm-down exercise. A slow, gentle way to relax and let his body cool down.

While Harry began working laps slowly and methodically, four other Thundercats joined Twinkle in a hidden passage that went from the seventh floor to the first that hadn't even been found by the twins or the Marauders. "What are our new orders?" A blue-eyed female asked, fiddling with a thread she had found on her way up there.

"Master hasn't given new orders Skye, but I think we should find out why the chaos specter hasn't made an appearance with the items given to him."

"What does he have to do with things?" A second Thundercat asked, his eyes focused on Skye's string and resisting the urge to pounce. A part of him wondered why the string was gray and smelled of the elder one that reeked of lemons and sugar.

"Master gave him items for assaults on the snakes and birds but hasn't done anything yet," Twinkle said, referencing a conversation his master had with him about Peeves so they could expect it.

"What of the ones who attacked Master's Luna?"

Twinkle grinned, a truly frightening thing to see on something that shouldn't be capable of doing so. "Our master created us with a purpose," he began. "We are meant to be keepers of balance. 'Respect is earned, not given'," he quoted. "Master's Luna was treated badly, but she is his. Therefore, she is one of us," he said darkly, causing the eyes of the gathered Thundercats to glow in an unearthly light as they stared into the ethereal abyss.

"One of us," they began to chant, causing a magical reverberation to rush from them and outward. As the pulse went through the entirety of the castle, the Thundercats scattered throughout the stone building all raised their heads and looked directly to where Twinkle was standing and stilled as their purpose called upon them.

"One of us. We are many. We are one. We are ..."

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Dumbledore sat up in his bed and stretched, yawning the sleep away and looked around his room for a brief moment to give himself a little more time to wake up. Slipping off and into his bathing chamber, he shuffled his feet and scratched in the usual places before his mirror yelped.

"Bloody hell! What did you do to yourself, man!"

Albus looked at his reflection in shock before realizing the mirror wasn't trying to show him a new look, but what his current appearance was. His beard had been cut and styled so it now appeared like a rather nice goatee while the removed hairs had been used to braid his long hair along with a few berets.

He was unsure what to make of the flowers woven in. Excellent artistry, but it would be difficult to unbraid without tying the hair into knots. Perhaps one of those girls always braiding those fur people's hair would be able to assist him.

Though that's where the Thundercats hidden under his bed had learned their techniques.

As soon as the old man left in hunt of the tiny humans, the Thundercats came out of hiding from all of the little nooks and crannies within the room, twenty in all.

"Put the smell-makers in his bed and above his chamber pot," Marduk demanded of his warriors. Marduk was a scruffy-looking beast who looked to have been petted the wrong way so many times it stuck. His constantly-shifting eyes had been a quirk that coincided rather well with his guerrilla tactic-infused mind.

And an Alastor Moody-like paranoia. Even the castle wasn't sure how that one happened.

"Raise the charmed fake spiders above the bed, place the crab in the chamber pot, put the snare trap in front of the window and-RAT!"

Twenty heads turned as one to stare at the rodent that suddenly stopped and slowly turned its head to twenty cat-like creatures whose ears flattened on their heads, bared their teeth and hissed.

Scabbers squeaked, turned tail and ran, making it to the crack behind the bookshelf just as four furry bodies impacted right behind him, mewling and clawing in an attempt to get at him.

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Luna stretched as she awakened before jerking up with a start and looking around. Wherever she was, the bed had sheets, a pillow, a blanket and she wasn't in pain, which meant the bed wasn't hers. And the reasons for being in someone else's bed generally weren't good.

Until memories flooded back to her and she crossed her eyes in relief and fell backwards onto the soft pillow that still had Harry's scent, now mixed slightly with her own. She sighed and put her hand over her heart to calm herself as she listened to the rapid beating in her ears. She found it rather odd that she remembered waking up earlier and talking to Harry and not being scared in the slightest and being terrified only a moment ago.

She shuddered in delight and smiled as she realized that, for a little while, she was safe. And it was absolutely amazing! Normally, she was miserable, cold and hurting by this time in the mornings when she was kicked out of her tower. And now she wasn't.

For the first time, she allowed herself to think that maybe there wasn't something wrong with her after all that caused people to naturally dislike her.

Luna looked around Harry's bed, wondering at the differences between it and her own before she saw the pre-dawn light outside of the window by Harry's bed show signs of orange and sighed. It wouldn't do to be found in Harry's bed in the morning by his bunkmates. Especially wearing his clothing and not having any of her own. It would mean they either saw the truth, that she showed up without them, or even worse, they were in some sort of situation that required vanishing them.

Luna sighed again and got out of the bed, keeping his shirt on and donning the robe he laid out for her to borrow before padding her way out of the boys' dormitory, taking only enough time to grab her



wand. She was thankful it was a Saturday and that most students would be sleeping in.

And she couldn't decide how to feel about walking around without panties on in Harry's clothing. Being perfectly naked was something she was used to and rather enjoyed. Some of her favorite Rites were done in the nude and under a full moon, after all, and swimming was certainly more enjoyable, but wearing male clothing? Somehow, she thought it was supposed to be more uncomfortable than this.

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"Enjoy your exercises, Harry?" Hermione asked as she saw him enter through the portrait hole. "Your hair's wet," she pointed out curiously. She had not caught him coming straight back from his workout after returning to Hogwarts and wasn't aware of where he trained or what he did there.

"Yea, I already got my bath," Harry admitted. "Ready for breakfast?"

Hermione nodded, knowing he was hiding something and deciding she would try and let him tell her on his own time. She wanted to try and not be quite as demanding, or what Ron called 'nagging', as she had been in the past. "Yes, actually. I worked on my mindscape longer than I meant to last night and I feel like I'm starving."

Harry chuckled as they made their way down and eventually into the Great Hall where Luna was attacking a smiley face's left eye, sunny-side up egg, and then the sausages that made up the hair before smiling at the two as they sat down.

"Good morning, Harry, Hermione," Luna chirruped.

"Morning, Luna," Hermione smiled back.

"G'morning, Luna. Sleep okay?" Harry asked, noticing the blonde was still wearing his shirt since it poked over the edge of the robe, but had changed the robe itself.

"Very much so. Woke up with a start, but was okay once I remembered I was in bed."

Hermione blinked slowly at the blonde with her scrambled eggs half way to her mouth. 'Did she just say she forgot she went to sleep in bed?'

"Mister Potter."

Harry looked up to see McGonagall looking down at him with a disapproving frown as he continued to chew his toast. "Yes, Professor?"

"I would like to know if there is a reason you have not gone to your detentions with Professor Snape." To those in the know, her thin-pressed lips and more rigid than normal posture meant she was quite unhappy.

"I refused to go because they were unfairly assigned. Snape ordered me to make my own potion, along with Malfoy's and his potion's partner. I was already working with Ron on our potion and had no reason to help someone with whom I share a mutual hatred."

'That wasn't Severus' version of events,' the older woman thought to herself, unhappy with being played like a fool by someone she should know better than to trust. Especially regarding her lions and Potter in particular. Still, while she was willing to address the situation at the tables since there weren't too many students in the Great Hall at the moment, there were enough now watching that she couldn't allow their authority as faculty to be compromised because of Severus' now-apparent abuse of power.

Boy was she wrong.

"I see. Then you should have come to me so that I could address the situation properly. But since you hadn't, I'm afraid you must now go to the detention as you were told."

Harry's eyes narrowed as Hermione shook her head, feeling slightly vindicated regarding her outburst after the Potions lesson. "Why would I come to you?" Harry asked rhetorically and more than with just a little disgust. "What in our last few years here have you ever done to prove yourself as willing to listen to me, much less someone I can trust to help?"

"What!" McGonagall and Hermione exclaimed in surprise and shock. "What in the name of Merlin are you talking about, Potter! I am your Head of House!"

"You're also the woman Hermione, Ron and I went to when we told you the Stone was in trouble and rather than find out how we found out to learn where any possibly security leaks or risks were, you basically told us to shut up and ignore the problem. You didn't increase security or check on the Stone, you left it to three first-years to protect, using means that those same first-years bypassed almost effortlessly."

"I...", McGonagall stuttered, feeling as though something was being ripped from her chest.

"Also, when you find us out of bounds after Malfoy ratted us out, you send us to detention in the Forbidden Forest of all places! At night! You knew there was something out there killing unicorn which meant it was evil, it could catch those unicorn, so it was fast as hell and it was drinking their blood, meaning it couldn't be killed because that same blood would not let it die! Three first year students with barely a full year of Defense which was taught by a man who barely taught anything."

"Y-you were out after curfew!" McGonagall spluttered, defending herself.

"Because we were saving Hagrid's job because he got a dragon egg from the pub," Harry defended. "Regardless, you knew how dangerous it was. It was practically a death sentence, and almost was since that same thing killing unicorns almost got me!"

McGonagall looked around and noticed the forty-some-odd students watching the events and cleared her throat, readying herself to rebuke him, but he continued on once again.

"You let people accuse me of being the Heir of Slytherin last year when you knew it wasn't me and you could have said something, anything, to get them to stop, you let that bastard Snape and his little minions in Slytherin go around mocking, ridiculing and belittling other students with racial and prejudiced slurs and don't do a single thing to stop it even when it happens right in front of you."

"So tell me, Professor, why should I trust you? Why should I trust any of the faculty when they all allow, or actively partake, in these situations? What have you done to earn my trust?" McGonagall was silent for several seconds as her mouth worked, trying to say something. "That is why I'm not going to that detention and why I won't allow you to make me."

"My office. Now," McGonagall eventually said, unable to think of anything else to say or do. While she had to admit things seemed a little bad when put side-by-side like that, she would not allow her shortcomings, particularly those that all but proved her to be a failure at her post in the school, be aired out in the Great Hall for even a part of the student body to listen in on.

Hermione's open mouth snapped shut with an audible clack as Harry rose without protestation, pausing only long enough to wrap a bit of sausage and egg in some toast and promise he'd see them shortly. She had never seen anyone, much less Harry Potter, rebuke Minerva McGonagall like that!

If he hadn't made such a sound argument, she would have been thinking of ways to rant at him later, choice to appear less nagging be damned!

As the group left, the brunette turned to Luna who was sighing and shaking her head. "I wonder if he planned on that or not," the gray-eyed girl pondered.

"Why in the hell would he have planned on that?" Hermione asked, still partly shocked at Harry's almost cruel words to their Head of House. Granted, they seemed accurate and sincere, but ... harsh.

"Because this is tied directly to what he was doing Thursday when you told me about what he did in class," Luna said, honestly sounding surprised Hermione didn't seem to connect the two herself. Perhaps it had to do with whatever she was thinking about. Her cheeks seemed oddly flushed and her breathing a little heavier.

"You mean you think he was expecting someone to approach him on it?" Hermione asked after a moment. "That would suggest that he was waiting for them to come to him and not going to one of them like Professor McGonagall said he should have."

"He did provide excellent points as to why he shouldn't," Luna suggested, looking around for the wayward Thundercats. They were surprisingly absent from everywhere. Not even a single one was pawing for food. 'How curious,' Luna thought to herself.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth several times, starting to say something and then deciding not to. She wasn't sure what to say or how to say it if she did. She would have to talk to Harry about all of this. Trying to make things different in school were one thing, but it was a totally different situation when you basically told the staff that you didn't trust them.

Hermione decided she would wait until after speaking with Harry to ask what was actually going on. So, she decided to sate the little knowledge nugget she was missing regarding her new blonde-haired friend. "I suppose I will try to gather more facts before I decent to tell him how idiotic he's being," she said playfully, trying not to worry about what Harry may be doing.

"Why did you forget you went to sleep in a bed?"

Luna watched Hermione's face over her grape juice as she drank deeply. She realized almost immediately where this conversation was about to head. It wasn't that she was upset about people knowing what happened, but she did not want anyone to feel sorry for her. Then again, friends shared things with one another, she was sure. At least, she overheard many friends telling each other things, so it had to start somewhere.

"I was locked out of the Ravenclaw common room without my wand or clothing and Harry gave me one of his shirts and allowed me to sleep in his bed. Well, he let me sleep in his bed and gave me a shirt when he woke up the next morning and realized my state of undress, anyway."

"You...," Hermione blinked, "showed up in Harry's dorm, naked?"

"Yes," Luna said simply. "They took my clothing and locked me out at night. Since Harry had given me a password just for me, he said I could come by whenever I needed anything. I considered going to your dorm instead, but I realized I didn't know which was yours, or which bed would have been yours either, so I went to his instead."

"Why...", Hermione began, floundering for words that were even close to what she was hoping to say. A part of her felt she should be upset that Harry saw this girl naked, and not totally sure why that bothered her, but another part was appalled that the girl seemed used to this kind of circumstance. "Why would they set you out naked? And why haven't you gone to the teachers? Or Dumbledore?"

Luna frowned, considering her response. "In order, they like to play these kinds of pranks on me. I normally have a place I go to to sleep the night away, but it was too cold and I admit I was worried about the dementors, so I went to Harry. He makes me feel safe. I haven't gone to the teachers because it would only antagonize them and they could not stop it from happening without punishing the House as a whole, which I would rather not happen. And lastly, considering Dumbledore seems to know everything else that happens in this school, I assume he already knew and didn't care."

Hermione shivered in revulsion as she realized the old headmaster did indeed seem to know everything that went on in the school and that everything Harry had been talking about, along with that apparent truth, she was seriously beginning to wonder what was going on in that school herself.

"Er, I'm sure Dumbledore wasn't aware. I can't believe he'd allow that kind of thing to happen."

"Perhaps not," Luna agreed. "There's no way to know for sure without asking, and even then, if he was aware and chose to do nothing, then I don't believe he would admit to such a thing. Regardless, I don't think it matters. What has been done has been done."

"How often do things like this happen?"

"Some kind of silly prank is every few days. Being kicked out of the common room and a time-restricted confundus charm on the entrance is perhaps once every week or two depending on their mood, it would seem. I would rather this not go to the staff, however. It would only draw attention to the problem and cause trouble."

Hermione frowned before she huffed once. "I would rather at least try and head to Dumbledore. Perhaps he could get you sorted into another House or something."

"Once sorted, you are stuck in your House. The hat simply refuses to sort anyone a second time barring unique situations that would mean it wasn't done properly the first time. And nothing else can be done that would make things better."

"Fine," Hermione agreed. "I won't tell anyone, but ... well, I suppose I just don't like the whole situation." In truth, Hermione's dislike for the situation was really quite pronounced. She had heard too many good arguments against telling faculty or going to Dumbledore. Harry's arguments, not even counting Luna's preference, were the honest facts. Going to faculty would not work. It never did on the bullies in primary school. They only got sneakier and generally came back for revenge. With the use of magic, that could be quite a bit worse for Luna than Hermione had gone through, which already was pale in comparison. She hated the fact that they couldn't do anything to help their new friend.

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Professor McGonagall sat stiffly behind her desk as Harry took the seat in front of her, radiating a cool confidence that he didn't really feel. He was, however, quite determined. Whether Fate or coincidence, his realizations earlier that morning and the resulting drive to bring change to the school was serving him well here so that his self doubt, even though still in existence, was shoved to the back of his mind.

This woman truly was someone he was angry with. While he couldn't explain the full extent of his distaste with her in public, this trend of blatantly ignoring things that she should be confronting head-on had to stop. In his fourth year, she didn't question his participation in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, she didn't assign homework or work on spells that would help him in the tasks or assist him with any additional training.

In his fifth year, just like in first, she told him to ignore the problem of Umbridge in hopes that she would eventually go away and let Ronald Weasley of all people become Prefect! Harry thought the boy was okay as a person for the most part, but he was, in all

honesty, too weak to not abuse the power he had been given, taking points from Slytherins because of his prejudice, taking items from students and keeping them instead of turning them in which is where he gathered quite the collection of naughty magazines and just simply antagonizing those he disliked.

That's to say nothing of her own involvement in placing him with the Dursleys and not looking in on him even though she was the one telling Dumbledore they were horrible people.

As for things she had done for him? Well, she allowed him on the Quidditch team as a first-year student and bought him a broom. But then again, she enjoyed Quidditch and wanted her team to win...

Was it any wonder he didn't trust the woman? Sure, she was a good person in general, but trust her to work in his best interests? She hadn't shown any reason up to this point that she could honestly be trusted.

"Is there something in particular you wanted to talk about, Professor?" Harry asked.

"I would like to know why you felt it prudent to say such disruptive things in the middle of the Great Hall and why you feel you cannot trust me, Mister Potter."

"Aside from what I said in the Great Hall, and knowing you were at least partly responsible for leaving me with the Dursleys and never checking up on me? Nothing up to this point comes to mind," he said, phrasing his response in such a way that he wasn't technically lying. "You were the one who asked the questions and didn't like the answers, ma'am."

He watched her lips thin even more as she fought to keep herself from providing cheap excuses. Simply put, she knew she should have looked in on him and not simply taken Albus at his word that everything was 'fine'. She had been the one to watch the Dursleys and knew they were horrible people. She just had no idea that they would really be that bad. They were obsessed with appearances and prestige and were as self-serving as they came. Minerva just simply had no idea that they would really be so bad to a child as they had been. She expected Harry to come to Hogwarts as selfish



and working to suit his own needs. Not some broken thing that had actually been abused.

"Mister Potter," she eventually began, "I admit that I was partly responsible for your arrival and stay with the Dursleys, but if I am going to be blunt, as you have been, then I should say that just because I watched the Dursleys and knew Albus had plans to place you there, that does not mean that it was my place to keep watch over you. Ten months of the year, I am here at school teaching, one month is here working on various duties I can not escape from and, while I do have one month of free time during the summer, I was never once able to go to the house because of wards placed there to ensure your safety from all magicals."

Minerva sighed as Harry's eyes narrowed and began to look confused. "I see you do not fully understand."

"From what I know, Dumbledore put blood ward around the house that were meant to protect me based on 'a mother's love' and that they were supposed to be the ultimate protection. I was starved, beaten, worked as a slave and stuffed in a cupboard under the stairs for a bedroom. So it seems they didn't work. So what am I missing?" Harry asked, now sounding less confrontational and hostile.

"I admit I wasn't aware of how you were being treated and have been rather displeased since I found out," McGonagall said looking weary. "But the wards, like any ward, cannot protect you so fully against literally everything that could harm you. That is simply too much for such things to do. You would be cushioned from every fall, unharmed by fire or heat or what have you. Even poor growth could be considered harm and a magic that protected from everything could even try to protect you from poor eyesight or even yourself if you were planning to do something harmful or risky. Do you see why a protection cannot be so generalized?"

Harry thought for a few seconds before nodding. "So, anything that could possibly be considered harmful would be something that would be too much work for the ward? At least when you combine it all?" He asked as clarification. It was curious, he realized, to actually get her perspective on his situation. He knew she had watched the Dursleys before his arrival and felt being friends with his parents would be enough reason to watch over him as a toddler, but he had never considered that she had her own life and duties that could

preclude her from it. Especially if wards were supposed to protect him and she felt he was as safe as they could provide for him.

Harry had been reading up on warding in an attempt to learn enough to break those he knew were around several of Voldemort's horcruxes. Wards had to be told what to do, what to look for and how to react to various events. There was only so much a ward could do before it became too much. And the more you added, the weaker various parts had to be or the power restrictions would break, causing the ward to fall entirely.

Therefore, saying those blood wards protected him from all forms of harm simply had to be wrong! Sure, that could explain how he survived so long against two forms of Voldemort, a basilisk, acromantula and the like, but 'all forms of harm' would mean he couldn't make those bad decisions that got him into that trouble in the first place or, with the nature of magic and a potential to run rampant and go awry, it could do something to harm people who only thought about hurting him.

Well, none of that happened because there was a very long list of people who wanted to hurt him still roaming around and not a single one of them dead yet!

"Yes," Minerva confirmed. "Like any ward, it had to be told what to protect you from. To put it simply, you were protected from any form of magical tracking, from any magicals coming to the house aside from Albus and yourself as the one who raised the ward and the target of it, magical attacks or magical tampering based on traces of blood or hair or the like and other such things of a magical nature."

"As an example," his Head of House continued, "there were several thousand harmful letters and hexed items owed to you from remaining Death Eaters in the first year after that night and this ward protected you from those. They were redirected to a vault under Hogwarts where dangerous things were removed and destroyed and gifts sent to you from fans like clothing, toys, money and thank-you letters were stored below in a room that only the Headmaster is able to enter to ensure its safety."

"So, it protected me from all magical forms of harm?" Harry asked.

"That would be a fair summation, yes. At the time, magicals were the only ones who should know of you and they were what we were protecting you from. It also watched for things that were placing you near death, but I am afraid I don't know the exact details since Albus has been rather quiet in fear of that information getting out."

"Is that why Miss Figg was so far away?" Harry asked curiously. "I know she's come by the house, so it doesn't work against squibs?"

The older woman blinked. "I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name. But, it is possible. I don't know, I'm sorry." McGonagall sighed. "I am telling you all of this because I don't want you to not trust me, Mister Potter. As your Head of House, you should feel as though you can come to me when you have problems, no matter what they are."

Harry nodded slowly, thinking. He realized he had been taking various things too literally and at face value, but he didn't really understand the mechanics of what he had been living under and Dumbledore had never once actually tried to explain anything to him. If he had been this horribly misunderstanding about McGonagall's involvement regarding his living situation, what else could he be wrong about? "I wasn't aware of basically all of that you just told me, so I apologize for blaming you for any part of my living situation since it seems you would have been unable to look in on me since you didn't say you were keyed into the wards, but what about first year when we came to tell you about the Stone or when you sent us into the Forbidden Forest? The traps and such?"

McGonagall straightened in her chair, upset that she was being interrogated by one of her students and upset that he was in the right in asking. It was not a good feeling or place to be in. "The stone was meant to be a secret. Talking about it in the open, especially with the way secrets spread in this castle, was forbidden amongst all of us. None of those who were in the know were meant to say anything about it unless in a particular room magically locked and checked for any forms of listening charms thoroughly before each meeting in regards to the protections around it. I was doing my best to keep you from talking about it since we never know how those secrets are discovered and spread about."

"All the more reason to find out how we found out about it then, isn't it?" Harry questioned.

McGonagall let out a disapproving sound from the back of her throat that was part sigh before nodding hesitantly. "I will admit, I should have endeavored to learn, but we had preselected actions we were to take if anyone found out about the Stone. No matter what was said or done, if anyone found out about it, we were to alert Dumbledore so that he could remove it and place a fake in its stead. How you learned did not matter quite as much as getting the Stone out of potential harm's way. I planned to ask you the next day to resolve the information leak, but by then, things had already happened and I was able to get the story from Miss Granger."

'Plausible,' Harry thought to himself. 'And definitely a smart action, even though they should have learned how we found out beforehand since it would only have taken a few minutes. Though, there is no telling what could have happened between then and when they replaced the Stone, so that was a weakness of the plan.'

"What about our detention?" Harry eventually asked after several moments of thinking in which McGonagall allowed him to draw his own conclusions.

"I ... don't have a good excuse for that, I am afraid," Minerva said sadly. "Hagrid did, indeed, say that something was killing unicorns, but I did not think of the situation in the same way as you've described it. Yes, I knew something was killing them, but I failed to think things through and you almost got hurt because of it. For that I apologize. I honestly don't know why I sent you there. I just knew that Hagrid was going to be looking for dead unicorns and felt you could assist him. I'm sorry. I was just vastly disappointed in you and when Hagrid found out you got in trouble because you were helping him, he had asked to be the one you served under. It just didn't occur to me that you would be going to the forest."

"What about letting Snape take house points and assign detentions for nothing and letting Draco and others spout that bigoted crap in the middle of the Great Hall?"

"While the faculty is aware of Mister Malfoy's actions and constant words, there are no rules against that. It is most certainly frowned upon and not liked, but there truly isn't anything we can do to stop it."

"Are you really that stupid?" Harry asked incredulously. "Make the rules or take points for being disruptive!"

"Mister Potter!" McGonagall snapped angrily, causing Harry to jerk back and look at her in shock. He had been on a roll and seeing the woman who had been meek and on the defensive suddenly turn the tables caused him to falter. "Regardless of what you may think or feel on the matter, rules pertaining to behavior must be approved by the Board of Governors. Since the majority are pureblooded and hold at least a modicum of prejudice themselves, rules regarding slurs over blood status or race are generally denied. Many of us teachers have requested those in the past and have been silenced on the matter. We have control in our own classes, which we enforce, but in the general areas of the school, we are bound by the school's general rules and I do not appreciate being reprimanded about things that I have tried fixing and cannot!"

Harry sighed and looked like the thirteen-year old he was. "Sorry, Professor. I guess it's just making me mad that so much is wrong and no one is doing anything to fix it. Hermione gets points taken off for being a 'know-it-all' by Snape, Ron for 'breathing too loudly' or whenever someone sabotages our potions or if a Slytherin one turns out badly. I'm just not going to stand for it anymore."

"I understand how you feel, but you cannot just ignore your detentions when assigned."

"Of course I can," Harry rebuked. "At least ones assigned improperly. If I earn the detention, I'll go. But something like this situation with Snape? No. If he has a problem with it, he can complain, but other than ranting about it, there's nothing he can really do."

Minerva sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "I assume I can tell you nothing to stop this foolish pursuit?"

"Nope," Harry said.

"Very well," McGonagall sighed. "Do you at least trust in me now? Will you be able to come to me when you have problems?"

"You've made me realize my thoughts about the blood ward and Stone were wrong and that I didn't have all the facts, but also as much as said you had no real reason for sending us into the

Forbidden Forest and that you don't plan to protect Gryffindors from Snape or his little minions who basically show Death Eater tendencies, frightening when you consider Snape was one. So no, I don't think I can."

McGonagall swallowed as she realized she really had failed her lions and that there really wasn't a whole lot she could do about it.

"Have a good day, Professor," Harry said as he stood and bowed his head, turned, and left without another word.

Minerva McGonagall had never felt so worthless as she did in that moment.

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That evening, the entire student body was in the Great Hall for Harry's lesson on casting the Patronus. Those who hadn't been there the first night a week before had heard about his ability to teach it well enough that several first years had been succeeding, even seeing some evidence of that in the halls, and had decided they wanted to learn how to do the spell as well.

There had also been an almost friendly bet between the houses as to which could get the most people to learn to cast the spell properly by the end of the month. Slytherins wanted the money and to claim beating the other houses, Gryffindor wanted to beat the Slytherins, Ravenclaws wanted to simply all learn the thing and felt the bet was simply a deadline and Hufflepuff wanted to prove themselves as not being the weak House they had come to be classed as. And maybe a little money, too.

"Does anyone know why dementors suck out the soul? Why they feed on that?" Harry asked, starting off the club meeting after ensuring Luna was with Hermione and Ron this time around.

"So they can eat it?" Ron asked aloud after a couple of seconds of silence causing a few chuckles.

"Our magics are a part of our soul. That's where our cores are and why, physically, we are identical to non-magicals," Harry corrected. "They feed on the magical core. That's part of why dementors only come from Kissed muggles. The magical cores in us keep magicals

from turning into that. But a non-magical person has no protection, like a poison from a spider."

"Now, I know many of you have been working on the Patronus, so I'd like to see how many of you can cast a corporeal one; hands?" No one's hand went into the air. "Okay, how many feel like they're very, very close?" Several dozen hands rose.

"Okay. Something I've been thinking about is how a dementor makes us feel like all our happy has been sucked out of us, making it harder to cast the spell. So, I thought, 'why not try the opposite?' I'll cast my Patronus and let it radiate its power around the room and I want you all to try casting the Patronus at the same time once mine is out. I'll give you five seconds to remember your memory."

Seconds later, Harry raised his wand and his stag erupted from its tip and looked across the students slowly. After a mental command from Harry, the spectre pulsed and feelings of wonderful happiness and joy swept across the room once again.

"Cast your spells!" Harry called out, making many of the students blink at him in confusion before they remembered what they were doing.

Harry smiled in satisfaction as a little more than a two dozen critters began to fly, run and hop around the room, adding to the happiness. He was pleased to see an otter and rabbit amongst those in the air and smiled proudly at Hermione and Luna who were grinning in a mix of pride, happiness and satisfaction.

"Excellent!" Harry exclaimed to the group before telling his Patronus to roam the school and herd the dementors away from the grounds. "Now then, since many of us will still need to work on this, feel free to do so with lots of chocolate and with a friend in case it tires you out. Now, let's look at shields."

Now that the students were gaining confidence and the knowledge needed for the Patronus charm, he was hoping to get them into shape so they could start to actually duel, possibly defending themselves later in years when Voldemort returned, or their homes or the school.

He also needed to know who was learning from him without second-guessing his orders for possible recruitment into his plans. He had a few ideas on the who, but needed to know if they were possible candidates this early in the game.

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Black Sighted Once Again!

By Marx Scheloub

His legendary escape from the horror known as Azkaban Prison baffled all of those who tried to figure it out, but Sirius Black was as cunning then as he has been in the last few weeks.

Black has been sighted in Diagon Alley and more recently, in various locations showing him heading towards Hogwarts. It is highly suspected that he is after his godson, Harry Potter, in an attempt to finish what his dark master failed to accomplish twelve years ago.

While there have been no murders to indicate Black has been settling old scores, there is little doubt that he's on the hunt for someone specific, and many believe it to be the young Mister Potter. There are dementors surrounding the area around the school to keep an eye out for Black, but many wonder if they will be effective since they failed to keep him in Azkaban and the only way we will know for sure is if we find he was successful at finding Harry Potter or not.

Sightings on Black have...

Cornelius Fudge threw his morning Prophet onto his desk and scowled. With the attack on the Hogwarts Express by the dementors, many angry parents had voiced their disapproval of having them guard the school, but he had been able to say they reported seeing someone sneak aboard which made them feel they had protected their children.

However, the Prophet would be delivered to the school and he had plans during the summer of using the Black situation to speak to Harry Potter and possibly form some kind of partnership to share their resources and better both of their situations.



The brat had been exceedingly difficult to find!

Cornelius had been unable to find Potter until the day he got on the train going into Hogwarts, and by then, it was too late. But, since the Prophet was spinning the Black case to show him heading towards Hogwarts, maybe he could use that to talk to the boy. Promise he had the support of the Minister of Magic to call upon and ingratiate him to perhaps do a favor or two for Fudge later?

'That's an excellent idea,' Cornelius thought to himself. 'He'll know who I am and can claim having my backing and he'll either screw up and use my authority to get his way on something and get backed into a corner and have to help me, or he'll ask for help to the same end.'

Perhaps it was time for a trip to Hogwarts.

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[Author's Note:] – I've created an outline for this story, and am in the middle of doing the same for others. About three quarters of this was written AFTER making that and it helped out tremendously with putting the events I wanted to happen in the right order without jumping the gun, so to speak.

## Chapter10 – Knicker Launcher!

Ship: H/Hr/L

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Soul Mates IMPORTANT!: I will explain EXACTLY how and why both Hermione AND Luna are Harry's soul mates and why it works as a threesome pairing in chapter 12. I admit I have been a little subtle about this, but it IS explained in this story already, just not thoroughly. It was subtle because Lora did not feel it necessary to tell Harry things he didn't need to know (so she thought.) I don't mind criticism, but please understand that I have a plan to explain HOW this works. I KNOW I haven't explained special powers that are usually in soul bond fics. I also know that Harry and Hermione aren't automatically together like in most of those soul bond fics. THIS WILL BE EXPLAINED! Remember that Harry doesn't even know Luna is supposed to be his other soul mate as of yet, and the only reason YOU guys know it is because she's obviously been getting close and I've labeled this as Lunar Harmony. Come Christmas time, before that actually, you will understand my plan for this. I will even tell you what my plot hole was and why adding Luna fixed it.

Hermione's Patronus: Yes, in the last chapter, her Patronus was an otter and where she first tried the Patronus, it seemed like a cat-like creature. That is intentional. Nice catch, though.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Champion's Champion" by DriftWood1965 (H/Hr – Comedy, extreme amount of Ron Bashing. This is not a crack fic, but is about the Harmony relationship and basically, Ron bashing. DEFINITELY some funny stuff.)

xXx Previously xXx

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Perhaps it was time for a trip to Hogwarts.

xXx STORY xXx

"I really must insist that you not go through with this," Dumbledore advised, looking over his steepled fingers at the round man with the green bowler hat. "Mister Potter will worry needlessly if we let him know that Sirius may be after him. Young Harry may even attempt to find the man himself."

"Sirius Black is an escaped felon who murdered his family, Peter Pettigrew and a bunch of muggles," Cornelius refuted. "Only a complete fool would actually look for such a dangerous criminal. Where is McGonagall?" He huffed.

"She only left a few minutes ago, Cornelius. But a man can be so consumed by rage, grief or revenge that he may not think things through. He may hope to take revenge against his parents' murderer by killing the man himself."

"Good riddance," Fudge laughed. "I don't think even Harry Potter could kill Black, but the man is unarmed and Potter'd be doing me a favor." He smiled as he considered Potter doing just that. While there would be nothing illegal about it since Black was a fugitive, the wonderful public relations aspect would catapult his career to even greater heights if spun in the right way.

Dumbledore's response was cut off by the office door opening and admitting Minerva with Harry trailing behind her.

"Ah! Mister Potter! It's good to see you! I'm-"

"Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic for the UK. I know who you are," Harry said, wondering what he had done to make the Minister show up at Hogwarts and call upon him. This had not happened the last time he started third year. He had met the man in the Leaky Cauldron. 'Ah! That's it. I didn't stay there this time. I guess he wanted to meet me and that was why he was there last time,' Harry realized. 'Wow that's pathetic.'

Fudge blushed and grinned widely. "I see my reputation precedes me!"

"That it does, Minister. How can I help you today?" Harry asked, motioning the larger man to a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk while the old man blinked in surprise as Harry commandeered his furniture.

"Feel free to call me 'Cornelius', Harry," Fudge smirked happily as Harry's admission to knowing who he was made him extraordinarily pleased. "I'm sure you've seen the Daily Prophet?"

'Much like last time,' Harry thought. "Yes. I'm guessing you are here about Sirius Black?"

"Quite right, my boy," Fudge said as he took his bowler hat off his head and began to twist it up nervously. "I want you to know I'll be doing everything in my power to ensure you and the others at this school remain safe from that murdering scum."

"I ... see," Harry said with a sickly-looking smile. "That makes me feel ... safe."

McGonagall pretended to let out a small cough to cover her smile.

"But of course it does!" Fudge decreed joyously, missing Harry's sarcasm. "I just want you to know that if you need anything, you can ask and I'll do my best to accommodate you."

"That's really not ne-" Harry cut off as an idea formed in his head. "Actually, I do have a request if you think you've got the ability to do it. I understand if the Minister position doesn't give you the power to do this-"

"Nonsense, Harry!" Fudge cut him off, looking affronted Harry could think such a thing. Which was exactly what Harry was going for. "I'm the Minister! I can do anything!"

"Oh, wonderful!" Harry said brightly, playing up the child act. "I'm worried he may go after my friends in order to get to me, but some of them are muggleborn and underage. I was wondering if I could get an exemption of some kind for anyone I claim as a friend, or maybe a friend of my house or however it's done in the wizarding world, so that they are exempt from the underage magical restrictions? I've got full faith in the Aurors, but there's no telling when he'll be captured, so I was hoping I could have that exemption to last indefinitely so they don't have to bother you to get it renewed. I'm sure you're a busy man with the position of power you hold," Harry said, acting as endearing as he could and buttering the man up by talking about how powerful his position, and the man himself by extension, was.

It worked beautifully.

"Well of course I can do that!" Fudge said rather loudly and happily. "I'd be happy to do so! Let me write you the order right now! Albus, if you please?" The man asked, turning to Dumbledore to get a piece of parchment and quill while Harry smirked.

"Just to make it sound more official, could you claim it as anyone who's a friend of the House of Potter? It'd sound more like something from the fairy tales in the muggle world and sounds neater," Harry offered, realizing that it wasn't a true order without that little tidbit. This was something that could only be done by the more powerful and established families and it was that family name that made it something that could not just be recanted at any future time to get his friends in trouble.

"Of course, Harry. Any particular friends you want me to name?" Fudge asked before penning the exemption license.

"I dunno," Harry pondered while his family rings supplied him with his options. 'God I love these rings,' he thought to himself before turning to Fudge. "I guess just anyone I name since I'm making new friends each year. I just want them to be able to use magic at home in case Sirius goes after them so they can protect themselves

without getting into trouble since we don't know what he'll do. As long as they keep to the Statute of Secrecy, of course."

"Very well, my boy," Fudge said as he began to scribble away.

By order of the Minister of Magic, I, Cornelius Fudge, decree anyone claimed as a friend to the House of Potter by the Family Inclusion Rights Act are exempt from the restrictions on Underage Magic Use as long as they remain so named.

Cornelius Fudge,

Minister of Magic

Witnessed by,

Albus Dumbledore,

Supreme Mugwump, International Confederation of Wizards

"There you are, Mister Potter! One exemption license by yours truly!" Cornelius proclaimed proudly as he handed his newest order to Harry, causing the green-eyed boy to smile.

"Thank you, Minister Fudge. I'm sure this will go a long way to making my friends and I feel much safer during the holidays and summers as long as there are possible threats."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that, Harry. We're doing everything in our considerable power to keep you safe. This is just to show you how much the Ministry cares for you!"

"Thank you for your gift, Minister. It makes me feel more comfortable," Harry said while bowing his head slightly. By calling it a gift now, it kept the Minister from being able to claim it as something that required Harry to return the favor at a later date.

"No problem, Mister Potter. Perhaps in the future we can work together and I can help guide you in the political arena," Fudge hinted, hoping to get a seedling of ideas into the boy's head so that it would open doors into the future.

"That is a long time from now, Cornelius," Dumbledore stepped in, wanting to keep the Minister from getting his clutches into Harry at such a young age. "Perhaps you can approach Mister Potter at a later time."

"Quite right, quite right," Fudge said with a nervous laugh. "I really should be getting back to the Ministry. I'm a very busy man, after all. If you need anything at all, Harry, you don't hesitate to send me an owl."

"Of course, Minister. Have a good day." Harry rose and shook the Minister's hand and watched as he bade the headmaster a farewell and then left through the floo. Once the tubby man was gone, Harry's grin returned full force as he looked at the treasure in his hands.

"Do you understand what just happened, Mister Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yea," Harry said, rolling the parchment up and putting it on the inside of his robe pocket for safe keeping. "Fudge was trying to use me for political clout to enhance his own career and trying to ingratiate me to him with this exemption order."

Dumbledore scratched his head in mild surprise. "Yes, actually."

"Will that be all, Headmaster?" Harry asked, rising and only actually asking as a nicety.

"Actually, no," Albus said as he leaned back into his seat and Harry sat back into his. "While I have you here and you have the time, I would like to know where you were at this summer as I was unable to locate you. Also, why you felt you had to leave the Dursleys and how you managed to get into my office without the password."

Harry sighed, wondering what had taken the old man this long to bring them up. "I stayed at Potter Manor because I didn't want to be a slave at the Dursleys' any more. You couldn't find me because of the protections around the grounds. As for how I got into your office, it's like I told you before, I asked the gargoyle to let me in."

"How did you learn about Potter Manor?" Dumbledore asked, believing it only possible once Harry came into his inheritance, but

that wouldn't be for another four years. He had been emancipated, sure, but he never said anything about having taken up the mantle of the Head of House Potter, which was the only way to get that inheritance.

"There's no reason for you to require that information, Headmaster," Harry said, stressing the man's title over Harry. The boy knew it was petty, but he wanted Dumbledore to be in the dark about things now. The entire time up to the point he was seventeen, Harry had learned only what Dumbledore allowed and had been left in the dark and, petty or not, he wanted this meaningless revenge on the old man. It was pointless and he'd learn it eventually anyway, but there was no reason for Albus Bloody Dumbledore to know everything that didn't concern him.

"Do you not trust me with the information, Harry?" Albus asked, wondering why Minerva began shaking her head and waving her arms to try and keep him from finishing the question.

Too late.

"Trust you?" Harry asked incredulously. "Hell no! You were directly responsible for every bit of my suffering the past twelve years. Excuse me for deciding I don't want you anywhere near where I live. Goodbye, Headmaster," he finished, getting up and leaving even as Dumbledore called for him to return.

"He's apparently learned quite a bit during the summer, Albus," Minerva said with a sigh as she sat down, electing to share the conversation about trust she had with Harry the day before. It was something of a terrifying realization for Dumbledore to find Harry blamed him for nearly every unfortunate thing to happen to the boy.

Even worse when he realized it made a lot of sense.

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"What'd the headmaster want?" Hermione asked with a yawn as Harry found she and Luna in the Gryffindor common room.

"Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic, came by to assure me that he was doing everything in his power to protect me from Sirius Black," Harry told her, falling into the chair across from the two girls.



"He couldn't really promise anything, but I did manage to talk him into doing something for me," he responded, grinning a lopsided grin.

"What did you get him to do?" Luna asked.

"Guess," Harry rebuked.

"Honestly, Harry, we can't possibly guess!" Hermione scolded lightly. "What'd he do?"

"I got him to remove the restrictions on Underage Magic for anyone who I claim as a friend of the Potter family," he said, watching both girls' eyes go wide and their jaws drop open.

"You mean you can get us to do magic at home?" Hermione asked in shock.

"Yup!" Harry chirruped. "All you have to do is swear allegiance to my family. The exemption Fudge wrote required that stipulation."

"What do you mean, 'swear allegiance', exactly?" Hermione asked carefully. In medieval times, that could mean a few things, depending on who and how those oaths were given. They could become anything from vassals to outright slaves.

"Basically, it means you become my ally and can't do anything harmful to my family," Harry admitted, causing Luna to nod rapidly as her radish earrings jingled back and forth. "Also, that I must endeavor to protect you and your family."

"He's right. We could either swear ourselves to him as allies, or he could offer us his family's protection, which basically does the same thing but it doesn't include our whole family," Luna began. "The Family Rights Inclusion Act basically authorizes certain families the ability to bring in other families under their banner, thereby granting them associated rights and privileges."

"Correct," Harry said. "By allying your family with mine, that means you aren't considered simply, 'muggleborn' by others. You have the same rights and the like as I've got, which equates to Pureblood since I'm the last of a Pureblood line. A few of them, actually."

"Why's that? And what does it mean to me if I ally my family with yours? Do I have to do what you say?" Hermione asked, thinking that had a lot of potential to go wrong. Not that she thought Harry would do anything she would disapprove of, at least like the thoughts going through her mind, but wondered if he even could do those things.

"Even Purebloods know that they have to marry outside of Pureblood lines to protect themselves from inbreeding or the occasional life debt that causes a non-Pureblood to marry into their family. So, they wrote laws that basically state that any children of a Pureblood line are considered Purebloods if at least one of their parents are the last of their lines. It was a measure of protection to keep their power," Harry explained.

"In your case, anything and everything you're involved in, legally speaking, is considered a Pureblood matter since I basically become your champion in the magical world, kind of like a Magical Guardian, but one that gives you a modicum of protection against anyone who threatens or actually does hurt you. I could even fight a duel in yours or your parents' honor if I felt the need to or you asked me to. It also means your parents would have protection in our world where, as of right now anyway, they don't have any rights. If they were attacked, for example, then they wouldn't have much defense in our legal system if they can't prove that whatever actions they took were defensive in nature. And if they are goaded into striking first, it's nearly a death sentence without protection like this."

"That's horrible!" Hermione exclaimed, shocked beyond measure.

"It's also not that different from how serfs or slaves were treated against Nobles in the past, which is what the Pureblood families are in the wizarding world," Harry explained. "Think of how many laws we take for granted are relatively recent; child labor, age restrictions on sex and drinking, child abuse, women's rights and the like. Those are pretty new in general, and the only one with anything similar to laws against them are child abuse, and that's mainly if the child attacked is from a Pureblood family attacked by someone else. A parent can do anything to their child without getting into trouble, pretty much."

"That's so wrong," Hermione said as she frowned. "But I guess if their culture is a few centuries behind the muggle, it makes sense

that their laws are, too. I hate that, though. Can I read up about this stuff in the library? I haven't read any books on wizarding laws while I was in there."

"Some, yes," Luna admitted with a bob of her head. "But some of it could be out of date and they won't have the full set of laws there. There are just too many to really keep on hand in the school, and little need to."

"I've got no idea, personally," Harry said with a shrug. "All of my knowledge comes from my Head of House rings, and those are charmed to provide me with any legal information inducted into law."

"Yes, but those are only for the Heads of the old Pureblood houses. Not everyone can get them and they're illegal to manufacture," Luna told him.

"So, if I get into some kind of fight," Hermione began, thinking over everything she was told, "then I'm basically guilty until proven innocent?"

"Your parents would be, but not you," Harry stated. "As a magical, you've got rights, but courts would be heavily leaning out of your favor due to bias and bigotry, or even bribery, but you have some rights like everyone else."

Hermione nodded. "I'll look into it, then," she said. "Why doesn't Hogwarts offer an introductory class into the wizarding world so we know how the laws are different than in the muggle world? Especially laws like ones where muggles could get into trouble just for defending themselves!"

"Dunno," Harry said. "I've been wondering the same thing, but there aren't any actual laws against it unless they're just agreements people have made and not actual laws."

"We can discuss unhappy laws later," Luna said with an airy wave of her hand. "Let's talk about Transfiguration instead, shall we? I want to make a monkey out of my socks."

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"Is there something I can help you with, Hermione?" Luna asked as the girl took her up to the female Gryffindor's dormitories. She felt this probably had to do with their discussion the morning before.

"I wanted you to know which dorm room and bed was mine," Hermione said, leading Luna to the bed farthest from the door, coincidentally like Harry's. "I want you to know that if you are ever in a situation like that one again, you can come to me and you don't have to go to the boys' dorms. I'm always available if you need to come to me for anything and at any time."

Luna smiled warmly and hugged Hermione close. "Thank you for being so kind to me," she said, squeezing Hermione extra tight for being so understanding before pulling back. "It's so wonderful having friends!" She proclaimed gleefully.

Hermione smiled back at her and took the blonde's hand. "I know how you feel. I didn't have any friends before Harry and Ron, either. I almost can't believe how I lived before them. I'm glad to call you a friend."

Luna's happy squeal made Hermione's eyes widen before she was glomped mercilessly by the blonde girl. The brunette didn't mind the lack of air. She understood Luna's sentiment about the situation. She had the urge to do the same thing sometimes, but refrained herself because her friends were of the male variety who didn't care for girls or their hugs.

There was definitely something to be said for having a female friend.

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It was three days later for her Wednesday Arithmancy class that Hermione recalled Harry's short comments about going 'deeper' into spell creation. The class had been learning the mathematical properties of the various parts of spells and how to convert them to equations and was doing simple exercises on a few of the first-year spells they had learned, but as she had finished the conversions already and was waiting for the teacher to call time to go over their work, she decided now was as good a time as any to ask.

"Professor Vector?" Hermione asked, raising her hand.

"Yes Miss Granger?"

"I learned recently that spells used to have much more work involved in creating them and that some 'shortcuts' had been developed to skip certain parts that makes them faster to create. I couldn't find any references to that in our texts, and found only vague ones from various books in the library and was hoping you could tell me what you may know about that," Hermione explained, noting, but not looking at Harry when she felt his eyes on her side and could see his head cocked to the side through her peripheral vision.

Septima Vector frowned and leaned back in her seat, pondering the question. "You've finished your conversions thus far, I assume?"

"Yes ma'am," Hermione said with a nod and almost willing to swear she felt Harry's smirk.

"It was something that was touched upon during my own schooling, but I was never taught details about applications, merely explaining what it was and what those shortcuts did," she began. "Imagine, if you will, the letter 'Z'. To write it, you go from left to right, then right to left and down, then lastly left to right again. Picture that letter in your mind, okay?"

"Alright," Hermione said, scrunching up her nose as she did so.

"Now, if you wanted to get from your starting position, to the ending one, you could just do the second step, but alter it slightly, right? Just go diagonally left to right and down, just to get from one place to the next. With me so far?"

"Yes Professor," Hermione said.

"Good. Now, by doing that, you get from point 'A' to point 'B', but you've lost your original shape and the 'elegance' that it brought. You have a single line instead of three separate ones and, while you get to the same place at the end, it isn't the same."

"Now," Vector continued, "if you assume each line in the 'Z' was a step in the process of making the spell, say power for the first line, function in the second and execution in the last, then you can see how each part does something to regulate the desired effect in a

particular sequence. However, with the simple diagonal line the shortcut created, we can make it do the same thing at once. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Hermione said with a frown. "But isn't that making it less efficient? That was described to me as weakening the spells in comparison to the ones in the past."

The professor nodded, looking somewhat sad. "Yes. If you have the chance to study the spells from more than a century and a half ago, you'll generally find that current spells are indeed much less efficient, but are also far, far, far less complex and much easier to craft and do the math on, usually by several feet of parchment for just a simple spell. It's accepted as a minor loss since changes tend to be rather minimal when you compare the results and ease in which the spell is performed. Just add a little more power and you still get the same function, and add a touch more still, and it will be just as strong, usually."

Hermione's frown deepened considerably. "But, when things get more complex, like with a more powerful spell, wouldn't that difference between the older and newer methods become far more pronounced?"

"It really depends on the spell, Miss Granger. But in a word, yes. However, I haven't seen any new and powerful spells crafted in my lifetime, as far as I know. If there have been, then it's only known to spell crafters or whoever may have crafted it. And it's possible that you learn that method when you specialize in spell crafting. I didn't, so I didn't learn how to do it. I can simply do the math to understand it all. My Mastery was in other fields of Arithmancy."

"Will we be able to learn to decode and do the arithmancy on those older spells?" Harry asked, looking forward to learning how to do that.

"Yes," Vector stated. "It's not that there are unique properties to those bits that are skipped, but that spells in the older methods have the spell form and do specific things in sequence as it gets used while the newer methods basically tell it what to do without those extra steps and they do it all as a mishmash of things at once. The math is all the same, just a lot more of it."

"Would there be any texts in the library that may be simply difficult to find regarding this?" Hermione asked.

"None specifically regarding what you're looking for except in the Restricted Section, and they're restricted for a reason," Vector said with a genial smile. She so enjoyed teasing the smarter students with the hidden nuggets of knowledge from that section of the library. She didn't do it to be cruel, but to see them scowl and see if they would try to sneak into the Restricted Section or if they'd ask for permission.

Well, maybe it was to be a little cruel, but just because she was willing to go with them to help them find things until she learned who could be trusted with permission alone and who not, so it wasn't truly being cruel. But even teachers had to have a little fun.

"Alright everyone! How many components are there in the Lumos spell? Mister Potter?"

"Three."

"Correct! Miss Granger, what are those components?"

"Power manipulation and regulation, conversion of the energy to light, and distance properties so the light comes at the end of the wand or an object," Hermione said, as the class progressed and they followed the time-consuming and repetitive motions of breaking spells down to their base components to be identified for the following fifteen minutes until the class was over.

"These are such fun classes," Harry told Hermione as they left the classroom together and wondering why he hadn't taken the classes his original time through. "I wonder what it'd be like to make spells from scratch."

"Uh huh," Hermione muttered, looking around nervously and fidgeting with her robe. "Hey, I've got to visit the loo. I'll meet you in Runes, alright?"

Harry blinked before he realized what was going on. "Ah. I understand. I've always got to go around certain times for some reason. See you there," he said, giving Hermione a seed of an idea to use each time their classes overlapped with Divination.

Hermione smiled gratefully and rushed off, though not in the direction to the nearest restroom.

Harry chuckled as he left to find his way to Ancient Runes, only to find Hermione already there and awaiting him.

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"Alright everyone! Pass up your Runic definitions to the front," Professor Babbling called out as soon as the class began. It was the first assignment given to get the students to learn what the various symbols meant as the foundation of the entirety of the class was wholly based on knowing those definitions.

"Now we're going to play Devil's Advocate," the professor said. "I'll call on you to answer my questions, and you have to defend the study. We'll find out who read the first chapter of their texts properly," the young woman warned with a fiendish grin spreading across her face as a few of the students shifted uncomfortably.

"Who shall the first victim be, hm?" She asked darkly, looking at a few of the Ravenclaw students and Miss Granger raise their hands. That wasn't the point of this exercise, however. Runes was a demanding class that didn't suit students looking for an easy grade or to simply coast through. So, she found a student with a history of slacking off but with high demands.

"Mister Potter. How can drawn lines or etched symbols possibly do anything? What makes them so special in comparison to, say, the alphabet?"

Harry blinked, wondering why he was called upon. He hadn't even raised his hand! "Er, special inks have to be used that are infused with magic so they actually hold power. The symbols themselves are drawn while charging each symbol which is where they get their power. And a rune etching kit has tools with special tips that etch the runic symbols and leaves fragments of crystals in place that can be charged so those hold power."

"Correct. Miss Patil, what can be used to replace the special inks that are pre-made?"



"Blood is popular and is actually a first-choice," Padma began, "because it contains the very essence of life which is something more powerful than magic itself as even muggles are alive without magic. You can use regular ink and simply put in a little blood, or ink with powdered crystal. Also, as Harry said, you can use straight powdered crystal in etched runes as well, Ma'am."

"Correct. You can also use gold and silver. The goblins and dwarves were famous for using that in their buildings, armors and weapons, but the book didn't tell you of that since most humans would rather spend those. Miss Granger, can non-magicals use runes?"

"They can, assuming they have runes that were charged in advance with the correct properties. But without a source of magic, they can't write a rune and make it function. Well, unless they want to use their blood. That's why most muggle legends have it all as bloodletting and dark or evil things. Some of them learned about Runes and did some pretty bad things with them because of that."

"Correct," Babbling said with a smile. "And that leads us into a discussion on that very function. Charging magic. In Mister Potter and Miss Patil's examples, they both mentioned crystals. Why is this an important part of the rune etching kit? Or even the ink that is used?"

Harry's hand was the only one up after two seconds, which surprised the professor. Not because his was the only hand up, but because there was one hand raised at all. "Mister Potter?"

"Crystals, particularly those with as few flaws as possible, are extraordinarily efficient at storing magic. So much so that, they're used in place of precious gems like diamonds or emeralds in some of the older ornamental weapons and armors that you were talking about dwarves and goblins making earlier. The composition of the structure to each crystal makes it highly suited to storing and channeling magic. Muggles have used microscopes to sort of make the crystals so large, you can see the smallest fragments and it looks like bricks on a wall all connected together."

"That's correct, Mister Potter, though I'm unsure of the ... microscope part. But this book doesn't go into that information. How did you come across it?" The professor asked, rather curious. Storage crystals were not touched upon until they got into runic seal arrays,

which were far more complex and generally needed more power than a single witch or wizard had. That's one reason rituals were so complex and almost purely outlawed in Britain. Once a ritual was started, and the magic being drawn from the user, it couldn't be stopped, and so many people performed rituals incorrectly that it required massive amounts more magic than expected, thus killing those attempting them.

"I've got a book from my library that talked about runes and seals and it talked about that and some jewels that were excellent for holding magical charges. Rubies were the only ones that were better than crystals, though, and they have to be perfect, so it was almost too expensive to use them in comparison to crystals for the boost since a flawed one is almost worthless. I couldn't figure out why, though."

Professor Babbling blinked and sighed. "Yes, that's true and what you said is accurate as well, but please refrain from looking through other books and don't look too far ahead or you run the risk of getting into things that you really do need much more experience to handle. Especially with seals. Those can go so bad that we'd be lucky to find your body if they blow up."

"I've ... er, kind of been reading it to learn more about the runes," Harry admitted sheepishly. "It's got dozens of other symbols that these don't talk about and is really comprehensive."

"Could I see this book some time, if it isn't a book from your family-only archive, of course. I'd rather not become a married woman this early in life," Bathsheba said with a grin as a few laughs filtered through the room and caused Harry to blush. "But I'd like to be able to make sure it's both accurate and not too advanced and risk causing you harm."

"I can bring it by later, yea," Harry said, slouching into his seat. The woman was young, compared to most of the faculty, but the idea of marrying her because she read a book sounded like something only Hermione could get herself in to.

Which made him resolve to look over everything his rings would tell him about sharing his family magic that night.

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"Ku ku ku!" Peeves laughed evilly, having finally come to implement his most masterful prank since ... ever, really. He had been told by Potty that he could attack, well, prank, anyone aside from a few. Opposite popular belief, he really was capable of learning and showing restraint. He just never had reason to.

A rather large trunk filled with things to be used was an almost fair compromise for not getting a couple children. In fact, Peeves was sure he was so generous that he would consider the two of them even for that arrangement.

Cayenne pepper on the Slytherin bog rolls, itching powder in their bed sheets, laxatives in their chocolate supplies, dyes in the shower heads, candy left in their common room to turn their teeth black, dung bombs attached to the top of their canopies to explode at one in the morning and plastic wrap on the toilets themselves had taken care of the Snakes and his promise to Harry about them, ensuring that only the first-years would remain safe and protected from harm, assuming they didn't take things that didn't belong to them, at which point Peeves felt they got what they deserved.

The Hufflepuffs got off much easier. They merely had green, blue and red dyes in their shower heads and fake spiders and snakes put in their bed sheets. His promise to Potty meant they got off much lighter and that a few other than first-years didn't get trapped.

The Ravenclaws were different, however. They were given laxatives much like the Slytherins and their toilets wrapped in plastic as well. But he had run out of liquid dye for the showers, so he got the Weasley twins to assist in making little launchers for his paint balls, set to get them all at night except for those who had to remain safe, of course, and put some colored powder into their shampoo bottles. He wasn't sure what a 'Nair', was, but he understood 'hair removal' well enough.

The Gryffindors, however, had several that he couldn't hit with pranks. Not only were several on the protected list, at least in comparison to the other houses, but his help from the Weasley twins required a few caveats of protection and he had finally been running out of prank items. At least that weren't already planned for elsewhere. So unfortunately, all he could do was put a good number

of fake spiders and snakes into second-year dorm beds and whatever bed was closest to the door in the third-year male dorm.

The screams had been wonderful! And the youngest male Weasley had run straight from his bed to the common room where he had the protected Granger girl go to his bed to take care of the fake spiders and had taken the offered chocolates Luna had found in her common room.

It was perfection at its finest! The Slytherins had been running back and forth between beds, toilets and showers the entire night! And from that Wednesday night to the end of the week, not a single one walked properly, first years excluded, of course. They had all been forced to take a cream made by Professor Snape and handed out by Madam Pomfrey who couldn't help but advise the Headmaster that the entirety of the Slytherin House second-year and above had developed questionable rashes on their anuses.

The resulting questioning had made them all quite uncomfortable.

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Luna pulled back her curtain and sighed as she found exactly what her little Thundercat friends had warned her of, that her blankets and pillow were taken from her bed once again and the sheets were in place, but lifting those up revealed the white itching powder one could purchase from Zonko's. It would only take about half an hour of laying on that before her skin would begin to prickle and another ten minutes for it to become rather painful.

A quick flick of her wand and the majority of the powder appeared to be vanished, but a quick scan for magical properties showed that the joke powder was only disillusioned, much the same way that an idea the twins would soon have for fireworks to multiply if an attempt to vanish them was made.

Luna methodically checked her clothes and found that her knickers had been sprinkled with the powder as well, but rather than coated in it, it was only lightly applied and to the sections that would touch the most delicate of her parts. Even her shirts were tainted with the caustic substance in the juncture where her armpits would rest, meaning she couldn't dress in layers of clothing as she had done in the past when her blankets were stolen.

The blonde sighed once again and levitated all of her clothing to her personal clothes bin to be washed by the next morning, along with her sheets. While the house elves would refuse her requests or service in the hallways, they were duty-bound to clean any clothing that was put into the hamper and did that dutifully and happily.

After several long moments of debate in which she considered flipping her mattress and sleeping on the other side, Luna realized a warming charm wouldn't last nearly the full night and her extra clothes wouldn't be washed and ready until the next morning after the elves checked the students' hampers for their sleeping attire. So, she had no additional clothing to layer herself in and would be quite cold. She had slept the night like that anyway in the past, wearing only her robe and her cloak, but she still had a tendency to awaken with the sniffles from the colder night air.

Perhaps this was another time to use her very own, personal password into the Gryffindor dormitories? Luna smiled as she quickly left the second-year Ravenclaw rooms and, after ensuring no one was in the common room working on additional homework, left the tower and began her trek up to her Gryffindor friends.

While she walked and listened for the pesky caretaker and his even peskier kitty friend, Luna pondered on what may have started this particular prank. Three nights ago, the resident poltergeist had pranked the entire school in a similar manner, leaving mostly Gryffindors, first-years and only another handful of students unharmed. After much observation, she found she had been the only non-first-year Ravenclaw not attacked during that time, which was something the other Ravenclaws had noticed as well.

Luna honestly couldn't understand why so many of them were so vocal about their displeasure. She was aware of each and every one of them, save the Head Girl, Clearwater, who wasn't even attacked having her own room, knew she went through those types of things almost every other night, but she never complained about it. Yes, it was generally quite painful, but they didn't speak up against it when she was the target.

Of course, that was about the itching powder. While Luna dealt with that more often than she did Transfiguration and Charms homework combined, they also had to deal with their showers making their skin

turn color and apparently, they had to deal with some rather questionable loo time. But even that, Luna still couldn't understand their outrage about. Honestly, she felt becoming all blue or red would be interesting for a day or two and they had forced her to eat things far worse than bad chocolate.

She did feel a little bad about those colored balls that splattered them with paint, though. She was hexed on occasion, but those things stained clothing. She wouldn't mind her skin being an odd color, but clothing was usually nice the way it was.

"Moonbeams are the bridges to our dreams," Luna told the Fat Lady, stepping in as the portrait swung open.

She was about to head up to Harry's dormitory when she paused at the bottom of the stairs and turned to look at the female dormitories instead. Hermione had explained that going to a boy's bed at night while naked was generally unacceptable behavior and the only reason it was okay then was because her options had been so limited. Her bushy-haired friend had also said that it would raise questions that may be uncomfortable to answer, especially if she didn't want people to know what was happening to her.

Hermione had gone on to say that she was always available whenever Luna felt she needed her and could share her bed with her if she wanted to.

Well, she had already had a slumber party with Harry. Perhaps Hermione would like to have one?

Luna giggled and dashed across the common room and up the stairs to the girls' dormitories and then up to the third landing, listening for any sounds from the closed door that may indicate anyone still being awake even though there was no light coming from under the door.

'I do hope that snoring isn't Hermione,' Luna thought with her head cocked to the side and picturing Hermione half laying on the floor in a position so uncomfortable that snoring was almost required. Shaking her head, the blonde cracked the door open and realized everyone was asleep, so she hurried in and shut the door before walking over to Hermione's bed, pausing only diagonal from it to see who the snoring culprit was. 'Ah. Lavender, I think her name is. I

wonder where she got a stuffed Harry Potter plushie from. Or if Hermione knows about it, for that matter.'

Luna shook her head and parted Hermione's curtains, blinking at the sight that met her. The bushy hair she knew, and had come to wonder how it managed to stay so poofy even though she didn't plan to ask the other girl, was acting something like an extra inch of pillow under the older girl's head while Hermione herself seemed to be nibbling on her pillow and mumbling incantations in her sleep.

Though the incantations were being spoken backwards.

'That ... takes some considerable talent,' Luna pondered before shaking the brunette's shoulder. "Hermione. May I sleep here tonight?"

Hermione blinked groggily at the blonde hovering over her. "Whuzzit?"

"May I sleep here tonight?" Luna asked again, smiling gently.

"Did'joo bring m' uh knicker launcher?" The brunette asked, still somewhere between awake and sleep. Most likely closer to the latter. "The trolls er try'in to take my books an' on-lee ah knicker launcher kin keep 'em a'way."

"No, but I can make us one," Luna responded without skipping a beat. They hadn't taken her wand away from her this time. She wasn't sure where the trolls were, but she would be sure to help as best she could.

Hermione scooted over and allowed Luna to climb in before latching herself to the newcomer and cuddling into the new warmth. "Take no priz-ners er the pyrits'll get us."

Well! Luna certainly didn't want that! Pirates were notorious for being bad people! "No prisoners," Luna agreed, yawning.

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Harry grinned as he rolled the parchment with the multitude of copied book-related spells up and tied it shut with a ribbon and large bow and pulled out a wrapped, thick tome he had made from a

specialty shop in Diagon Alley over the summer. It was actually a very large diary, but was nice and thick and had heavy covers with a nice, but ultimately simple, Celtic design that he felt would appeal to her sense of aesthetics.

It was the nineteenth of September, Hermione's birthday, and thankfully a Sunday so they wouldn't have to worry about classes. Harry had asked Dobby to make her a large birthday cake and gather several different types of drinks and have them all delivered into the Gryffindor common room at noon, where the Gryffindors were always willing to have a party, regardless of the reason.

That, and there was always room for cake.

He had originally planned on getting all of the Gryffindors in on the party, but realized that Hermione had never really been one for being the center of attention like that. Much like him, she didn't feel comfortable having so many people looking at her. So, while the whole house would have the benefit of the cake and drinks, he only brought it up to Ron and Luna, both of which spent much and most of their time with Harry and Hermione, respectively, feeling Hermione would appreciate a smaller and more intimate gathering than a large party. Ron still seemed to have issues sitting too near and talking to Luna, but had begun to spend more time with his original friends and decided he would show up even though he didn't have anything to give her.

Maybe he could get her cake for her.

Harry happily bounded down the stairs into the common room where the birthday girl and Luna were waiting for him to head down to lunch.

Or so Hermione thought.

Harry snuck up behind Hermione and wrapped her in a hug from behind, remembering just in time to move his head from the head butt she attempted to throw his way in surprise. He had learned his lesson during the summer. "Happy birthday, Hermione!"

"Harry! What are- ACK!" Hermione was cut off as Luna pounced and wrapped her in a hug as well, squeezing the laughing girl between her blonde and black-haired friends.



"Happy birthday, Hermione!" Luna chirruped, grabbing a package out of her pocket and handing it to Hermione as she pulled back to sit next to the surprised brunette on the couch.

"I ... thank you," Hermione said with a smile. She watched Harry set his two gifts onto the table and sit opposite Luna and watch as she divested the small box of the shiny silver wrapping paper and opened it, pulling out ... "Luna? What is this?"

"A knicker launcher!" Luna chirped brightly. "Shrunken, of course."

Harry repressed the urge to laugh as Hermione set the contraption down and enlarged it, seeing what looked like a three-foot long trebuchet. Hermione squawked indignantly as soon as it was full-size. "Are those my knickers!"

"Uh huh!" Luna said happily with a cute bob of her head and looking rightfully pleased with herself. "You said last night that trolls were coming for your books and that you needed me to bring a knicker launcher and we couldn't take prisoners or the pirates would get us, so I brought it! I haven't seen any trolls, so I assume they know of our arsenal." She opened a flap on the side of the wooden base, revealing a wide assortment of Hermione's underwear, several of which made Harry choke.

Who'd have thought the brunette had a thing for thongs?

"Harry James Potter! Don't you dare look!" Hermione scolded, covering the boy's eyes with one hand and trying to close the door with the other.

"Hermione, it's okay. I've seen you in your bikini when you swam at my house. Underwear isn't that different," Harry consoled the mortified girl. And it wasn't like he hadn't already pictured her in her underwear...

"That isn't the same, Harry," Hermione muttered.

"Did I do something wrong?" Luna asked, wondering at Hermione's reaction. She had gotten Hermione what she asked for, and all of her own knickers were with the house elves in the wash. Well, all

except the two sets of clothes that she had stored in Harry's wardrobe, anyway.

Hermione allowed Harry to pull her hand from his face and looked to the blonde who looked truly concerned and couldn't find it in her to be upset with the girl. She could vaguely recall her dream and, considering she had awakened next to the blonde that morning, she assumed she had brought it up somehow and knew Luna was probably working on short notice for her birthday. "It's wonderful Luna. I don't think I'll have to deal with another troll for a long time. Let me just go take this to my room," she said, shrinking the three-foot contraption back down to pocket-size and dashed up to her room where she could hide the pilfered panties where they belonged.

"I think she just didn't want me to see her undies," Harry whispered to Luna conspiratorially.

"I liked the black ones with the green cat's eyes on the butt side of them," Luna said with a bright smile.

Hermione returned with a minor blush and sat back between the two of them as Harry handed her the large present first. She opened it, glad Harry wasn't bringing up her unmentionables, and gasped as she saw the book held within.

It was about fifteen inches tall and wide and six inches thick in a dark scarlet color with gold accents on the spine and trim with a beautifully carved, bronze medallion inscribed with a Celtic knot that acted as a lock with a latch that came across to hold it closed and heavy-weight cotton paper.

"It's lovely, Harry," Hermione said, stroking the embossing and opening to see it empty aside from an ownership tag on the inside front cover. She smiled as she read the message, 'To Hermione Granger. Brightest witch of any generation and more precious than all the gems in the world.'

"It goes with this," Harry said, handing her the scroll.

Smiling, Hermione pulled on the ribbon and opened the parchment, reading spells for restoring books to mint condition, including restoring faded writing, spells to protect books from water damage and bugs and finally, the item that made her gasp, was the spell to

make books like Harry's own by combining books and scrolls into one to make a true grimoire.

"H-Harry?" Hermione asked, her voice just as shaky as her hands holding the parchment.

"We can use a copying spell on my book and then add it to yours," Harry told her. "You can have your own family grimoire and even copy many, if not most, of the books in the library for your own use."

Hermione stared slack-mouthed at Harry for all of two seconds before she was up and running for the door before Harry grabbed her by the back of her robe and pulled her backwards into the couch with a laugh. "Hey Luna. There's a really fun muggle tradition on birthdays that I'd like to introduce you to," Harry said, grinning wickedly at Hermione who looked on in confusion.

"Oh? What's that?" Luna asked.

"Have you ever heard of birthday spankings?"

"Harry James Potter! Don't you dare t- ACK!" She was cut off as Harry pulled her into a hug that kept her arms pinned between the two of them and locked his legs around hers while she glared up at him with a fierce blush.

"If you would like the honors, Luna? It's one for each year and she's now fourteen."

Luna let out a joyous squeal and hopped out of her seat to whack Hermione one good one right on her bum, followed by a second as the brunette laughed and tried to escape. "One nargle, two nargles, three nargles..." Luna counted.

"I am so going to make you pay for this, Harry," Hermione growled into Harry's ear.

"You say that now," the unrepentant boy said, smiling as he stared into her brown eyes as Luna finished and he let Hermione sit on the couch beside him after a fierce punch to his arm. "But what about after this; Dobby?" Immediately, the large cake and several sodas and bottles of butterbeer popped into existence, along with a sight that Hermione couldn't tear her eyes from.

"Harry? Is that..."

"Pepperoni, sausage, pineapple and extra cheese, your favorite," Harry said as he opened the top box to show Hermione the pizza Dobby had obtained. He had tried it the first time over the summer when her parents had hosted him for dinner and Hermione had shared her love for the tasty device that could be eaten with one hand. Though he decided not to read with the other. "I thought Ron would be here, but I guess he's eating lunch in the Great Hall first."

"What is it?" Luna asked, poking the strange food and able to appreciate how round it was.

"Pizza!" Hermione half yelled, half growled out happily. That almost made up for the birthday spanking, though not quite. She'd get him when he wasn't expecting it.

Harry set out a few plates and set the pizza on them while Luna sampled the orange soda, letting out a surprised burp and then giggling as the fizzy drink tickled her nose.

"Ah! I'm on time!" Ron exclaimed as he entered through the portrait hole. "Happy birthday, Hermione!" He came forward and sat in a chair while looking at the round pies of some sort.

"Thanks Ron," Hermione said warmly. "How'd you guys find out it was my birthday, anyway?"

"Harry told us," Ron said, taking the plate Harry provided and sampled the food the same way he watched Harry eat it. 'Sweet Merlin! We've gotta get the house elves to make this!' Ron, it seemed, rather liked four-meat pizza.

"Well, let's hurry up and eat so we can get to cake. Whatever's left can be left to let some of the others try. I'm guessing by Luna's reaction that purebloods don't really get much pizza?" Harry asked, taking some of Hermione's pizza. He'd gotten a dozen pies of different types, along with three of Hermione's favorite since he rather enjoyed it also, and figured a lot of people would like it.

"Is that what this is?" Ron asked. "They should serve it here."

"Dobby learned to make it over the summer, so he may be able to do it," Harry said. "It's even better with hotwings."

Hermione looked up in surprise before looking for the tiny box that delivered the hot-sauce-coated goodness that was the chicken wing.

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"Mister Potter, would you stay behind please?" Remus asked the next day as the class was leaving the Defense classroom. After the events from their previous class, they hadn't brought in another boggart and most of the class had stayed a small distance away from Harry after his ... excessive reaction. Hermione and Neville had been the only ones who were willing to be around him in the room and the Slytherins had adopted a 'watch but do not aggravate' mentality.

At least for the most part.

"What is it, Professor?" Harry asked, wondering what was going on.

"First, I'd like to ask if everything is okay since our last class. You just kind of left and Miss Granger had to pick up your wand to get it back to you," Remus began, sitting on the table across from Harry.

"Yea, I'm fine. It was something from a really bad dream I had a while back that sometimes comes around now and again. It just kind of shocked me to see it while I was awake," Harry explained, using a story he had planned that same day of the incident.

"I see," Remus said, not really understanding at all, but certainly understanding what a nightmare can do to a person. "There's something else I've been meaning to ask. On the train, you called me 'Moony'. I was hoping you could explain that," he began, not providing any information just in case Harry knew less than the older man worried he did.

"I ... have a lot of dreams," Harry said slowly, looking out of the window and into the Forbidden Forest. "Sometimes, they don't seem like regular dreams, but memories. You looked different, but not by a lot. There was you, a guy who turned into a dog and a fat guy who turned into a rat that I didn't like."

"I ... see," Remus responded, watching Harry intently. That didn't tell him a lot and he was too worried about asking. "I had been friends with your parents. That may be it, then."

"It could be," Harry allowed. He had once been upset at the man for apparently not showing up at the Dursleys', or writing him while he was there, but after his talk with McGonagall, he realized that even if the man had tried, the wards would have prevented that.

"There's one last thing I'd like to talk to you about," Remus said with something akin to a smile. "I'm not asking if it's you or not, but this 'Bolt' character is casting a lot of attention towards his possible pranks as being yours. What, with the green eyes, a name referencing your scar and the lightning in the background."

Harry blushed slightly. He had noticed that people believed he was Bolt. It was partly because he had never really had a Marauder name and because he really had no real experience in the pranking field on remaining subtle. But also, it was partly because some slightly vain part of him that hated how he acted in his past wanted to be acknowledged and recognized. "Yea, I've noticed that too," he said nervously.

Remus chuckled in amusement. "Your father and I were a part of a pranking foursome in our Hogwarts days," the werewolf reminisced. "We were called the Marauders. I'm pretty sure we turned McGonagall's tabby form gray before its years."

Both laughed before Harry shook his head. "Yea, I've heard of you guys. The Weasley twins idolize you. They found your map in their first year and that is what inspired them to become pranksters."

"Ha! I had all but forgotten about that thing," Remus said happily.

"Yea, I've got it now, but I'm keeping it locked up. Mostly," Harry replied with a grin that Remus knew all too well.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

"How did you guys become animagus? Or is that just something from my imagination?" Harry asked, wondering if he could get the secret out of the older man.

"That really happened, but ... is something we should probably talk about another time," Remus said nervously, not wanting to get into exactly why it had been done. "If McGonagall found out I had said anything about that, I'd be dodging hexes for weeks."

"I understand," Harry said with a smile. "I'll talk to you later. I'd like to get some lunch before the hour's up."

"Of course," Remus got up and gestured to the door. "I didn't mean to keep you." As Harry left, Remus wondered at why Harry hadn't asked any questions about his parents.

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"It has been two weeks, Mister Potter," the Fat Lady scolded as Harry tried to enter the Gryffindor common room.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked, confused. "Two weeks since what?"

"You have yet to even attempt to speak to Hogwarts," the older woman sniffed, looking frighteningly like Molly Weasley when angry.

Harry shifted nervously and looked at his feet in shame. "I ... er, had forgotten about that," he explained.

"She is getting most insistent that you attempt to. Perhaps you could try some time tonight?" She asked, sounding far more like a demand. Hermione had that tone when she asked Harry if he was studying. Perhaps it was something in the female genetics?

"I'll, er, try that, Ma'am," Harry said, uncomfortable by the woman's stare. Honestly! She was a painting! "I promise I will..."

"I'm glad to hear it," the Fat Lady said, finally opening the door and allowing Harry to rush through before the woman changed her mind.

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Hermione's eyes darted about, looking for the ever-elusive Madam Pince. Her back was to the book shelves and her personal grimoire and the scroll for combining books was in one hand and her wand in the other for quick and immediate copying.

Seeing the librarian talking to a Ravenclaw, Hermione spun and darted between bookshelves, ensuring no one saw her as best she could and made it to the back of the library where some of the older and more obscure books were hidden.

As she arrived, she giggled like a woman not totally right in the head. "You, my pretties, shall soon become a part of my collection."

"Miss Granger?"

"ACK!" Hermione spun and saw the stern features of Madam Pince looking at her critically. "M-M-Madam Pince! Hello!" She exclaimed, looking decidedly nervous and as if her hand were caught in a cookie jar.

"What 'collection' were you planning on adding these books to?" The elderly librarian had known enough students to have something of a sixth sense when it came to nefarious actions within her library. If she liked the child, she had a tendency to turn a blind eye, but when those that knew the rules and generally followed them acted like a common burglar, and badly at that, then she took notice.

Hermione gulped and was suddenly unable to come up with a good lie. "Harry gave me a bunch of spells to take care of books, restore them to perfect condition, protect them from water or bugs and make a copy that can be added to my own book so it doesn't harm the original and I have it in my own collection," she rushed out, holding the scroll up as an idea came to her. Never let it be said that Hermione Granger wasn't an intelligent woman! "And I'm willing to share the book care spells if I can have your permission to copy any of the books."

Madam Pince's eyes widened as she heard of the book-care spells. Such spells would be the envy of every library in the world! She reached forward to grab the scroll and see for her own eyes, but it was cruelly snatched from her grasp.

"Uh, uh, uh," Hermione tutted. "Do we have an accord? I share the spells, and you pony up the goods."

Madam Pince looked into the eyes of Hermione the Horrible, as she decided to begin calling her, and knew she was making a deal with the literary devil. "As long as you're sincere in those spells. But I



can't let you copy the Restricted Section. Students aren't allowed to read from there."

Hermione grinned. "I wouldn't be reading. I'd be copying and reading from my own, personal book. But you can't share these spells with anyone or write them down."

"Then we have an accord, my dear."

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[Author's Note:] – Yes. That was Pirate Hermione!

Timeline: Starts Sept 12, Sunday. Pranks and first two classes are Wednesday, Luna is pranked on the eighteenth and then the Remus scene is Monday, the twentieth.

Again, Soul Mates will be explained in a few chapters and I ask that you give me time to explain that. I've hinted at it (more than one or two lines,) but haven't explained it outright to most of you. That was deliberate.

## Chapter11 – Calm Before the Storm

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Warnings: Suggestive material (see A/N for details.) This is likely to be the only time it is in the story.

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Sorry this took so long.

Suggestive Material: In this chapter, Hermione goes through Harry's mind and looks at dreams/fantasies focusing on her after he sees something in her own mind (turnabout and fair play and all that.) The material is NOT explicit, but quite suggestive. Nothing is shown, but it suggests things happening. Worse is shown in movies that are deemed suitable for young teens.

This story will not have sex. This story, while being a little more mature and risqué, is not expected to have sex. Will it happen at ALL? Possible. But NOT during this school year, I can promise that (though, dreams/fantasies/thoughts WILL happen). Nudity will occur. It already has. But other than similar situations, cuddling and maybe kissing, I don't plan on writing anything naughty in this. If it DOES happen, it will NOT be graphic or on-screen. There will be other stories for that (Check out my other story, "Darkened Paths" if you want that.) I want this story to remain pretty tame on the naughties.

Review Reply to Orca1967 who asked about three things (possible mistakes, one of which WAS a mistake on my part.) I should probably mention this to everyone anyway, so here you go. These are the points given (in bold), followed by my response. This is why I LOVE constructive criticism. You guys can catch things I don't. Thank you.

In chapter 10, you had McGonagall talk about the blood wards and what they did. But you didn't have Harry confront her on the fact that what she said was wrong [compared to what Lora, the death angel, said]. In the very first chapter of this story it was pointed out that the blood wards only protected Harry from being possessed.

In chapter one, Lora tells Harry the protections on himself (the power used against Quirrell) was all but exhausted and would take years to gain that kind of strength back. All that was left were the wards, which kept him from getting possessed. However, the other wards (as far as McGonagall knows) were still in existence. Protection against those magical forms of scrying/searching for him. McGonagall is telling Harry what she knows, which is what Dumbledore told her. Dumbledore added his OWN wards. As such, she knows he was protected from those harmful owl posts (and saw the evidence of that.) Beyond that? You'll learn in an eventual (not too far from now) confrontation with Harry and Albus.

There's also the fact that she said only Dumbledore could get past them to the Dursley home. Then how do you account for Fred, George and Ron saving him before second year.

The wards in place are like any others. You can be keyed in. Dumbledore, with Harry befriendng some of his most ardent supporters, will have given access rights to all of the Weasleys and various faculty and people he, himself, trusts or thinks he can't keep Harry from (like Remus, Sirius, Hermione, etc). There is no way of knowing who he'll need to allow access. And the wards that exist to protect him, like those owl redirection wards? Who says those are the blood wards? Dumbledore has NEVER struck me as the type of man to tell a person all of the story if he doesn't feel he needs to (and we know Canon!Albus didn't, at ALL). And not telling McGonagall everything means she can't divulge everything. As far as she, or anyone who may capture her for information finds out, knows is that he is fully protected by those blood wards.

[Edited for length] Harry mentioned "rings" plural, rather than "ring" singular, regarding his family rings. Why didn't the girls catch that? Also, why hasn't anyone noticed the bracelets?

Yes, Harry did say "rings". No one else knows he is more than simply a Potter but Harry, Gringotts and Lora, thus far, though some know he is a Gryffindor heir like Albus. And when I wrote that, I

wrote it as the girls assuming he meant family rings in general. That is a small detail that not everyone will catch. Most of the time I'm talking with someone, I don't always catch those tiny slips, or I may catch it, but not really think much about it and pay attention to the continuing speeches or the topic rather than the words used. I only catch things like that when I'm looking for key words or lies. With friends? Almost never, ESPECIALLY if we're discussing something serious unless I'm suspicious or curious about what they may be hiding and looking for clues like that (particularly when caught in the middle of something and trying to find the truth.)

As for the bracelets, I will be honest and say that I just hadn't let the characters notice it. I looked back to see that it was actually a tiny plot hole. I didn't WANT anyone to notice them, but I didn't write in the solution for that. I was stuck between two options and forgot about it. I will correct that this chapter with a slight change, but so it is said, I meant to have Harry cast a disillusionment charm on them before going back to Hogwarts so they just wouldn't be seen, though I totally forgot about people feeling them (Luna in bed with Harry or Hermione grabbing his wrist and the like, even if she already knew about them). Sorry about that.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Return of the Elemental" by Flyin Eagle (H/Hr – Complete)

xXx Previously xXx

"We can discuss unhappy laws later," Luna said with an airy wave of her hand. "Let's talk about Transfiguration instead, shall we? I want to make a monkey out of my socks."

[Edit]

Luna let out a joyous squeal and hopped out of her seat to whack Hermione one good one right on her bum, followed by a second as the brunette laughed and tried to escape. "One nargle, two nargles, three nargles..." Luna counted.

[Edit]

"Uh, uh, uh," Hermione tutted. "Do we have an accord? I share the spells, and you pony up the goods."

Madam Pince looked into the eyes of Hermione the Horrible, as she decided to begin calling her, and knew she was making a deal with the literary devil.

### xXx STORY xXx

Hermione woke up, uncurling the sleeping blonde's arms that had encircled her throughout the night, and let Luna remain asleep in her bed while she got up. Quickly, the shambling brunette went through her morning rituals, relieving herself, showering and getting dressed. Once finished, she gathered her school bag and then made sure all of the other girls were sleeping soundly before rushing into the hallway and turning time back two hours before dashing down into the common room. She never wanted to remain long in the place she turned time, constantly worried about creating a paradox because of it.

Since her first full week at Hogwarts, this had been a major part of her schedule. She would wake up and do what she needed before turning back time and then going where her 'past' self would not be until after she turned time backwards, thus ensuring she would not have to worry about crossing paths with herself. Hermione did her best to give herself two extra hours in the morning to work on her homework and study where no one would ever question her dual presence and an hour after dinner to work on her mind magic in the dustiest corner of Hogwarts she could find to keep herself far from anyone who may realize there were more than one of her.

Then, every Wednesday she was forced to go backwards in time two hours for two classes rather than just the single hour each class demanded because she would constantly be late since, as she went back after one class was over, it would be after the other had started and her time-turner didn't have minute increments, only hours. And finally, she gave herself two hours of time for research on days she didn't have classes that required time-looping.

That meant anywhere from five to upwards of eleven extra hours on days when two of her overlapping classes were double-length. It was really playing havoc with her sleeping schedule and she was having trouble controlling her magic. It wasn't that her magic was running wild and acting independently of her, but when she tried to pull it from her core and mold it into her spells, they would sometimes be ... wobbly, was really the only word she could think of.

Perhaps jerky. It was like it was trying to stretch out like a gas would and she had to really concentrate on some of the things she had been casting occasionally.

Not to mention the apparently very odd conversations she had with Luna when she didn't fully wake up that the blonde shared with her. She still had to keep the excitable girl from trying to give Hermione her panties. It wasn't that Hermione wasn't flattered, honestly it wasn't, she just didn't know how to tell the younger witch that she wasn't nearly as obsessed with Luna's underwear as her sleepy self appeared to be.

Were she able to be concerned with more than what she was already dealing with, she would greatly question why her sleepy self kept bringing them up.

And why always with Luna.

Hermione pulled out her new grimoire, happy that Harry had copied several of the assimilated volumes from his own that he had been carting around, rather smugly she thought, and allowed her to absorb it. While the false version wouldn't have survived for long, only about an hour for her she had come to find out, once added to her grimoire, it was quite permanent she was happy to note. So she now had a portion of his own shared with hers, including the section on mind magics.

She was very thankful Harry had been so boyishly dense and gave her an easy out with her odd needs for solitude, associating her daily trips to the loo as just a time of day she had to go. Though, perhaps he wasn't quite that dense since he seemed surprised she had made it to their shared class before he did when he didn't have to make a stop on the way. And went straight to the classroom. Thankfully, he always seemed to want to talk about something or other when something like that came up.

Had she not been so relieved during those fragile moments, she may have caught how odd that, along with how he never questioned the shared classes between her and Ron that occurred at the same time, seemed. But those moments where she had no idea of how to answer his questions without risking the trust in their friendship by collapsing lies and any free time she may have had was so filled

with extra work that she had no time to really think about it, only be thankful for it all.

She hated lying to her friends like this, though. Hated it! Harry and Ron were her first true friends. Lying to them like this was just horrible! She had never lied until she met those two. Now, she felt like it was second nature to her and she hated that McGonagall was forcing her to do this. Of course, she was still a bad liar, but she was getting better at it.

After all, she had a massive trial by fire with her dorm mates their first weekend at the castle. Hermione had been very tired, having used a large amount of magic when Harry gave her her first lesson on the Patronus. Apparently, from their perspective, it had been a very suggestive series of events with Harry whispering sweetly into her ear that seemed to cause a blush, followed by a lengthy hug that their romance-obsessed minds saw as far more than it really was.

The little vultures got her as soon as she entered their dorm room!

Hermione stifled a yawn from the near-constant lethargy she found herself under and buckled down on her homework. She had been falling behind the past few days since her birthday after copying several books into her personal grimoire and in an attempt to find information on some of the laws Harry and Luna had mentioned in the library, along with the various topics Harry had brought up that she didn't know and her school work had been suffering because of it.

She would have to thank Harry later for asking Ron to play chess or talk Quidditch whenever he asked about their coursework when she realized that he always did it when Ron began to ask questions.

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Ron stared at the scrolls in his hands with his mind running furiously as he tried to understand Hermione. It was only a few days to the end of September and a good many assignments given throughout the month were soon due. Naturally, he hadn't so much as thought about them until the end of the week after Hermione's birthday when the teachers reminded their pupils that they would be wanting the completed essays finished.

His first stop, of course, was Hermione. He knew of no one smarter, except maybe Percy but there was no point in asking that git for help, than the brown-eyed girl. After he had asked for help with his Potions' essay, she had grabbed the empty scrolls from his hands, the only text being the title, essay assignment and his name, and written the essays for him for each of the assignments he had at the time, Potions, Charms, Herbology and Transfiguration, knowing he would soon approach her for those as well as was his habit.

She just sighed, slumped her shoulders and took them, doing the work without a word of complaint or even a glare for not doing it himself.

It wasn't natural. There was always a good ten or fifteen minutes of arguing and petty name-calling, asking Harry whose side he was on, then complaining when he told Ron to do at least part and ask their friend what he needed to work on more thoroughly, and then a compromise where Hermione wrote an outline for things he had to write about in his own words and then rewriting the Ron-written project to correct for spelling, grammar, punctuation and full-out incorrect information and making him do it all again.

She just ... wrote.

It wasn't that Ron wasn't glad to have the work done, even happy that she had thought ahead and only barely did the required amount so he could copy it in his own handwriting and adding in nothing extra like with her own work, or lately Harry's. No, he was ... confused. And he had this really bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. Like there was this cold rock in his belly that didn't want anything to do with the essays, and he didn't understand what it meant. That cold rock was telling him to destroy the essays, and he knew that some Slytherin had hexed him, as that was really the only explanation.

But he didn't even care, as odd as that was.

Something was wrong with Hermione. She would have to be healed if she were to help him plan vengeance against the Snakes. And once he got some hits in, he wouldn't have to feel bad about this and everything would be how it was meant to be. Harry would agree with him, at some level anyway, and Hermione would basically do his work for him, and he could do whatever struck his fancy.



Knowing he was hexed, and suspecting it was during Harry's last school wide lesson but not knowing for sure, Ron put the essays in his trunk to copy later, 'no point in letting good essays go to waste', and went downstairs to the common room where Harry and Luna were sitting and talking over some big book with animals in it while Hermione was hunkering over several books and scrolls in one of the large chairs where people knew to not bother her.

'Poor bloke,' Ron thought to himself as he approached his best mate. 'I wonder what Hermione got on him to force him to study more. Whatever it was, it had to be really bad. Maybe she got a picture of him naked or somethin'?' He mentally smiled as he considered the possibilities for something like that. He knew he wasn't nearly as smart as any of his brothers, academically. He had seen some of the twins' pranks and knew they revolved mostly around potions. And the others weren't even in the same league, being so far advanced as a dragon tamer and curse breaker. Even Percy seemed to be headed for a Ministry job. But Ron was sure he could perform some wonderful pranks with nudie shots of the Harry Potter.

Or at least make a lot of money.

'Something to think about later,' the redhead thought as he slumped down into the couch next to Harry, furthest from the weird blonde girl, and made sure Hermione wasn't watching them. "Harry mate, I'm worried about Hermione," he muttered quietly enough so the stressed brunette that chose just that moment to growl at her paper and scribble something furiously wouldn't overhear him.

"Us too," Luna responded before Harry could. A small part of her realized this was one of the few times the boy had approached them without plans for his Quidditch club to discuss with Harry or because everyone else was busy. At least of his own volition. The rest of her was focused more on the somewhat cranky friend who was scratching out part of the Runes assignment she had placed on her Arithmancy essay. "She's been becoming more irritable and ...-"

"-Grouchy," both boys finished for her, quietly.

"Bugging, bollocking, piece of, grrr," Hermione muttered, unaware of the three pairs of eyes on her.

Luna nodded in agreement. "Well, yes. That too, but I was going to say 'scary'."

"I've been sayin' that one for two years," Ron grumbled in annoyance. "But still, what d'you figure it is? You think she was hexed or something? I mean, she ... er, helped me with my homework and didn't even say nothin'. She just ... helped."

Luna discreetly rolled her eyes since she knew exactly what that 'help' had entailed, but said nothing so as not to cause a disturbance, no matter how wrong she felt it was. She had no problems with truly helping a friend, but leeching from someone when they were obviously overworked and stressed out was just wrong. Especially when that someone was her friend. "Something is different about her, but she is not under any hexes. She just seems to always be tired. She even quotes her essays and spells in her sleep." Luna felt, given Hermione's strange habits of not wanting to discuss underwear during the day, that she wouldn't bring up how she usually seemed to pretend that Harry was with Luna and asking their opinions on how she looked in her various knickers.

It was kind of amusing to bring it up just to watch her eyes go buggy and to see her jabber unintelligibly, though. It always made Luna smile...

Ron looked at Luna, plainly horrified. "How'd you figure that out?"

Harry noticed Luna's eyebrows bunch slightly as she tried thinking of a way to answer him without admitting to sleeping in the same bed as Hermione, since the brunette seemed averse to anyone knowing Luna was sleeping in the Gryffindor tower, and decided to change their focus. "We'll give her a little time and see if she gets better. If not, then we can talk to her about it. She's a smart girl and knows how to take care of herself." In his mind, he continued, 'at least I hope so.' In his memories, Hermione hadn't become this stressed out until the middle of November. Or at least, he hadn't noticed anything until then. He wasn't sure if it was him being a bad friend to her, or if it was that she was getting worse faster, but he wasn't happy with this particular change.

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"Mister Potter!" The Fat Lady screeched as he left the Gryffindor common room for his morning workout.

"What?" Harry asked indignantly, spinning in shock to the angry portrait, half expecting to see Molly Weasley. It was far too early for howling, angry women. Even if they were only a portrait.

"This is the last time I shall tell you to try and speak to Hogwarts! I won't even allow you back into your common room if you don't! You promised you'd do so the other day and you didn't!"

Harry winced. "I'll do that before I even start my workout. I'm heading there now," he said, hoping to appease the angry woman.

No such luck.

"You had better," she grumbled. "I will know if you don't and this is not some idle threat. You will find yourself sleeping in the halls or the loo; I don't care who you are heir of! Now get along!"

Harry's face betrayed the horror at the thought of having to sleep on the floor of a boy's bathroom. There was a high doubt that even a vanishing charm could really remove certain ... messes.

Looking green around the gills, Harry scurried to the Room of Requirement and began pacing back and forth frantically. 'I need a place to speak to Hogwarts. I really, really need a place to speak to Hogwarts!'

The room he stepped into was roughly the size of the Great Hall and had nothing in it except for a large sphere in the center that was twelve feet tall and shiny like a giant, liquid gold marble. It reflected the torches and stones on the walls, but did not seem to reflect Harry himself.

Warily, Harry walked to the giant ball and looked at it carefully. "Are you Hogwarts?" He asked, watching as the section of the sphere directly across from his mouth rippled gently like a pebble thrown in a pond.

"Yes." A very loud voice responded as ripples on the sphere spread out, much larger and faster than when Harry spoke. It sounded female in nature and echoed heavily in the room, making Harry feel

the speech reverberate within himself. It was odd, he thought, as his own voice didn't echo.

The voice also sounded frighteningly weak, as if its speaker was exhausted.

"I, er, was told you wanted to speak to me?" Harry hedged, wondering what to expect. He had thought there would be some human-like thing he could talk to, but he hadn't expected ... this.

"Yes, Father," the sphere spoke again, making Harry blush.

"What about?" Harry asked, hoping to ignore the 'father' comment. There was nothing, nothing, that could prepare him to become a father at thirteen, no matter how old he was mentally!

Though, seeing Hermione and Luna's reactions to the news that he was one could have been somewhat interesting...

"It is your place to command my defenses. To protect me and those inside of me. I know what you know, Father. I do not wish to allow the Death Eaters to violate me as they did in your memories," Hogwarts said, sounding something like an actual frightened child. It was more than a little disconcerting. Especially with the way she finished her statement.

"You don't need to worry about that," Harry said warmly, to his own surprise. Very strange trying to comfort a castle. "I am hoping to make sure that never happens again. I'm actually removing the devices that were used to make that happen soon." Mentally, he winced. 'At least, I am now that I thought about it. Maybe the cabinet thing can help that John guy from the alley with those portal things for the trunks.'

"Thank you," the voice said, speaking more quietly than before. It was almost like a whisper, even though it was still just as powerful and loud.

Harry shivered as he felt a warmth surround him and squeeze gently, feeling extraordinarily like one of the hugs he got from Luna or Hermione. The next moment, he felt a pressure on his chest that seemed to seep in and into some part of him that was far deeper than his chest should actually have gone as the spirit of Hogwarts

bonded herself to his magic so she was always connected to him before mostly pulling her essence out. As the feeling abated, Harry had to ask the questions running through his mind, unsure of exactly what had happened and not really paying enough attention to worry about the weird feeling tingling in his chest for now. "How do you exist? I mean, did the Founders make you have a mind?" He asked, feeling a strange sense of confusion somewhere within himself that wasn't his own.

"I learn what is known from those who step within me. All books, all devices which hold memories and all knowledge within the people. I am not sure when I was, or how, but I became me. I continue to grow as I exist," Hogwarts said, sounding as though this was some form of rite.

"What do you mean, 'became you'?" Harry asked.

"I think, therefore I am'. A student long ago knew that knowledge and I have grown from it. I am unsure of who decided or when I became female, but since I am always referred to as such, I must, then, be female, just as I am therefore your daughter."

Harry blushed again. "Well, uh, I've never been a dad before," he said with a strange expression on his face. "But I'll do my best. So, you just kind of grew?"

"I was not created, but born," Hogwarts explained. "I am not sure of what or how, but you must somehow be my father. I believe you may have chosen Hermione as my mother. But as you have not yet procreated, I am unsure of how that happened, though I suppose it could be some form of time-travel I am not yet aware of, as you are not yet aware of it."

Harry squeaked as visions of a smiling and very naked Hermione popped into his hormone-driven mind as Hogwarts spoke of them 'procreating'. From the sound of ... his daughter, he would have thought she was more Luna than Hermione.

Still though, he thought he had an idea of the basics of what may have happened. In the muggle word, his cousin Dudley enjoyed playing video games where the enemies had artificial intelligence and could adapt as they fought you, moving this way instead of that or using different weapons.

Hogwarts' wards were much like that. There were several that activated under certain conditions, such as keeping out undead creatures, as none of them would ever be seen as needed within a school of children, though that posed the question of how the dementors got in. Then there were also the wards that could be activated to lock the school down to keep invaders out. And all of the wards could be activated manually for one thing or another.

The difference between a game's artificial intelligence and that of Hogwarts, however, was that a game's was set to do something specific and grow a certain way and there were always reset points. Hogwarts, it seemed, came about after a thousand years of altering, adding and upgrading wards and the ambient magical energies of thousands of magicals roaming through her halls. Literally billions of spells being cast within that time and a room that had been created to absorb knowledge so it would never be lost as long as Hogwarts stood and be whatever its creator needed. So, it was as though the magic had latched onto the realization that all of the previous headmasters, faculty and students thought of the castle as a safe haven that was meant to store and teach knowledge and protect the students within it and, like boats or cars, was generally referred to as female.

It would take a long time to prove, if he ever could, but Harry felt that what he was speaking to was a sentience that came into being over the last millennia based on everything that was attached to it in some way and its original purpose, along with the hormonal urges of hundreds of thousands of students of its thousand-year existence that was geared towards baby-making and thus, the creation of life.

Was it really so surprising a life was eventually created?

The Founders crafted Hogwarts as their final baby. Their final child after their own had grown and gone and it was meant to protect the students within.

And she had developed, much like a child, and was still in her infancy or early years, mentally speaking. She was dependent on Harry since she could not take over control over things that she was never meant to, so she needed her daddy to do it. She needed Harry to help protect her and those she was meant to protect.

Though her own thoughts that it could be some weird form of time-travel were certainly interesting, too...

"Um, I don't know about that," he said, feeling very embarrassed to be talking about naughty things with anyone, really, but the castle especially, "but you're here now, so it doesn't matter. So, since you're here, what do you want me to do?"

"I needed you to come to me so you could help me grow and take control of my defenses. They will obey you at your request, but only if you can speak to something that can manipulate them such as the gargoyle to the Headmaster's office or the entrances to the common rooms. Now that you are connected to me, we can speak and you can give me the orders so I can do what is needed to activate them as you choose once you learn to speak to me through that connection."

"Connected?" Harry asked. "How did we connect?"

"I connected to you," Hogwarts stated simply. She had never before bonded to anyone like she was now with Harry because none of the other Headmasters held the same rights over her as he did. They connected to her wards and defenses, but never to her, specifically. So she really didn't know how else to explain it other than blunt and brutal honesty the likes of which only a child could really employ. "You are my father. It is only natural for you to tell me when I am to do something as any parent to any child. It will take time to do so when you are not where I am, but I know you will not abandon me."

Harry felt oddly guilty and ashamed at that moment, unsure of why or how. But at the same time, he felt like this may be some actual being, even if not like him, Hermione, Luna or even the git Draco. He wasn't sure how he knew it, but he knew she could feel. He knew that the school itself was of her body, the students of her blood and this sphere of her essence or soul. He was never really one who delved too much into philosophy, but he felt that if Voldemort could still exist without a body, and Peeves could come into being without ever even having one, why couldn't another life be created without one in the first place?

"No," Harry said, thinking of the school, of Luna, of Hermione's notebook of dreams and goals for the wizarding world and of what

he was sent back to do, "I won't abandon you. Will Dumbledore still be able to control the wards?"

"He can until you say otherwise. He cannot do anything to impede you, however."

Harry nodded. "Thank you. Are you able to conjure a body and roam around? Or are you stuck as the castle?" Harry watched as a ripple started out at the edges of the sphere and rushed to the center in front of him, giving Harry the odd sensation that Hogwarts just blinked in surprise.

"I have never attempted to do that. I will try to learn how to do so. I know I will be able to control a form in this room, but it would be much like a marionette. It would be a puppet. Not me. But that could be fun. I will try to learn," Hogwarts said, sounding enthusiastic and the large sphere began to bounce up and down slightly.

'Definitely reminds me of Luna,' Harry thought. "I see. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about right now?"

"No. I just wanted you to know me," the voice said, sounding something like a child again, even with the big, booming voice. Her tone sounded shy and hesitant, making Harry almost sure he saw her mentally scuffing a toe to the ground. It was going to take a lot of getting used to, Harry decided. If he didn't know better, which he wasn't sure he did, then he would have said the voice sounded curious and hopeful.

"Well, I'm glad to have met you. I'll try and learn to speak to you without coming here. That's what you meant by connecting, right?" Getting an affirmative, the green-eyed boy left to recall the Room of Requirement as his training room, wondering at the idea of being a dad at thirteen.

He could never allow Daniel Granger to learn of this!

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"Harry, I was wondering," Hermione asked Friday night as Ron took the essays she had written several days before to a corner to rewrite in his own hand. Harry had suggested not forcing the redhead into doing his work in hopes that Ron would take more initiative by



learning a lesson. However, he had procrastinated so long that he was now a full day into October and late in turning them in and was finally buckling down and getting them done.

The teachers were nearly in a fight over who got to give him detention first. Snape, the dirty fighter that he was and still smarting over Harry's wriggling out of detention, had won and planned on making the son of his school nemesis suffer by making his best friend suffer.

Hermione didn't have to correct Ron's work, since he was basically just rewriting what she had written in his own handwriting and found herself with an odd night of freedom from her schoolwork or intellectual debates with Luna since the blonde Ravenclaw was using some of the books from her own common room library for reference material and wasn't allowed to bring it to the Gryffindor's abode, regardless of how friendly they were with her. There were some things she knew even Harry Potter couldn't allow her to get away with, and that was certainly one of them. So the quirky girl was doing her work in her own common room. "How long do you think until my own mental defenses are strong enough for what you were wanting to tell me?" She allowed herself a big yawn as she waited, laying back into a large pillow she transfigured out of one of her shoes. The other shoe was currently being used as a book stand.

Harry blinked as he put his Charms essay down. He had actually thought they were basically done with trying to get into each others' heads for a little while since they couldn't test his without taking her off the allow lists, and in all honesty, he hadn't thought that her own defenses would be all that different. "I don't know. We can try if you want."

Hermione nodded. "I think I've got my walls and the like nice and strong. But I haven't tried them yet. I also added some stuff after seeing your mindscape."

"And you're okay with whatever I may see? I mean, you don't want to see if Luna can do this since she said she knew how to or something?" Harry asked delicately, unsure of what he would see or what may happen while in her head. If he were honest with himself, he was actually quite scared after Luna's somewhat ominous proclamations.

Interested, too, but still scared.

He was worried he would find her interested in someone other than himself. Harry wasn't sure if it was always there, or if it was the soul mate thing, but he was constantly looking forward to the day he could call her his girlfriend. A part of him still didn't want to be alone, but mostly, it was that he was so astounded to realize that Hermione really was a wonderful girl.

He was also angry with himself that he hadn't pursued her before basically being told to. After so much time being told that Potter men loved redheads and being pushed towards Ginny, and honestly believing they would end up together, he was somewhat amazed by how ... natural the idea of Hermione as something far more than friend truly was. They got along so well he couldn't understand why he was so oblivious to it the first few times through. Hell, even Luna had heard more of his life story and darkest fears than Hermione had until they were stuck in a small living space together. Ginny didn't know him at all. Ever. Heck, he had even had a stronger relationship with Luna than with Ginny, even though they weren't a couple! The only reason Ginny had been in a higher place than Luna as his friend was because he had snogged Ginny.

"I trust you, Harry," Hermione said with a tired smile. "I like Luna and think she's a great friend, but you are my best friend. I don't think there's anything in there I don't mind you seeing, especially since you were willing to let me poke about in your head, too."

Harry nodded, feeling somewhat better. "Alright. Get comfortable and let me know when you're ready."

"Okay. I'm ready. Keep going until you think you find something I don't want you to see or if you think we should stop. I want to try and force you out like you were letting me," she told him, taking a deep breath and then nodding at him.

Seconds later, she nodded at him. "Legilimens," he incanted, looking into her brown eyes.

It was strange, Harry decided immediately, but not totally unknown to him as he felt himself rush forward from his own mind into that of Hermione's. It was actually eerily similar to when he remembered entering Voldemort's mind, only minus all of the pain and anguish.

Until he found himself freezing his danglies off in what felt and looked like an arctic tundra.

"Bloody hell this is cold!" Harry yelled out to anyone who could be listening as he wrapped his arms around himself and spun in a half circle, turning to face a huge monolithic building that gleamed brightly as light shone off of the ice covering it.

Harry ran forward and thrust out his hand, pushing his will forward and splintering the wall. Growling as the wall cracked and splintered but didn't open, he did it a second time to make the crack large enough to slip through and shivered as the cold was removed from him, only to be replaced by a heavy weight that seemed to hold him down. It was interestingly like what he imagined swimming in a pool filled with pudding would feel like.

Something he had never considered before meeting Luna.

Perhaps it was somewhat unfair to Hermione for her to be defending herself against Harry for her first time. The boy had developed a natural form of mind-magic control as he fought to keep himself separate from the soul fragment in his head from near-infancy and during the various mental assaults by Voldemort, but neither Harry or Hermione were aware of that developed talent. Harry was never one who could defend and not take an assault head-on. That was where that natural talent came from. It was also a direct cause of his battle prowess. Defending against the soul fragment had gifted the boy with a natural fighting talent.

That was also why Snape's method of occlumency training was such a failure. He was teaching Harry to fight off any mental probes while Harry had no idea what he was doing and thought he was supposed to create some kind of mental barrier. He had just tried letting the defenses come as if by magic, which was exactly the wrong thing to do, regardless of what Snape tried to tell him about it happening that way. So, he was never able to handle those 'remedial potions lessons' other than the one time he fought the man's probe off, doing what was natural to him. But then, that was also why he had to develop a mental defense. Snape's usual methods, or Dumbledore's, was too subtle for him to recognize and defend against while Voldemort tended to make it as painful as possible to keep Harry from any defense. So, Harry going into

Hermione's mind was actually using skills he was subconsciously adept at using, making the whole activity lean in his favor. Severely.

Harry wasn't really thinking about fair, however. He was simply happy it was warm inside of the building as he shook his arms to clear off the ice that had frozen his arm hairs and pinched his nose for ... much the same reason ...

Then his eyes widened and he yelped in shock as what looked like a horrific ghost rushed forward with an even more horrifying wail and rushed through him, applying pressure as it tried to drag him back through the opening where the icy wind was causing a screeching sound.

"Oh hell no! It's freezing out there you bloody spook!" Harry exclaimed and pushed forward, fighting against the spirit-like thing even as it began to get colder and emulated the cold from moments before, weakening his concentration just as it had outside. Knowing he had to fight it, Harry grabbed it by its creepy neck and threw it aside and into the wall, making a disgusting 'splat' sound as it lost its shape and formed a glowing puddle on the ground.

"Oh that's just gross," he said, crinkling his nose as he looked away and tried to make heads or tails of the place he found himself in. It was like a giant hallway that split into three different directions several feet down.

It caused an unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach as he got to the end of the hall and realized he was in a large maze. And for whatever reason, his brunette friend seemed to have a strange fixation on cold, which only made things worse as the cold air mixed with warm stone and left a thick fog on the ground, possibly hiding any traps that lay about.

"Hermione is a bloody scary girl," he muttered to himself, stepping slowly. The idea of falling into spike traps had him moving very slowly indeed.

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While Harry was moving about, Hermione was in a place she had not actually been in before, leaving her somewhat confused and unsure of how to respond to Harry's advances. She was aware of

his exact position within her and exactly how he was moving inside and what he was doing. When he had broken through her barrier, the wall of the monolith, she had felt the destruction and, while it didn't hurt aside from a strong stinging sensation as he punched through, she was aware that she was somehow no longer complete. Well, not her, herself, but her mental wall.

Her first instinct had been to cry out and tell him to try to be more gentle, but instead, she released one of her wraiths to try and push him back out, but he just pushed right back, slowly gaining ground. She had received the idea from seeing the various guards within Harry's mind, but she hadn't anticipated having to fight through the wraith's actions. She also hadn't anticipated just how ineffective she would be at it. She was winning in the beginning, but then he fought back and she was quickly overpowered!

She also naturally had a defense that was supposed to keep intruders feeling heavy and the air was supposed to be so much thicker, for lack of a better term, that he shouldn't have been able to move nearly as fast as he was. He was almost moving naturally!

And after he made his way to the fourth hallway where he came across one of her first bait memories, where the memories themselves were mostly meaningless and totally harmless, she lost the strength to fight him or his exploration throughout her.

It was suddenly quite obvious to her that she was simply too tired to keep him out of her mind. She had been exhausting herself while working on so many classes and extra learning that her mind was simply too weak to really defend with, while his was all but completely fresh.

And he touched her memories with a feather-light touch, all but a gentle caress, and she was lost to his explorations, letting him explore and move forward freely, unable to deny him.

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Harry smiled warmly as he found a floating, pale blue orb that he touched gently and then watched a two-year old Hermione reading a book upside down next to her parents as she sat beside them while they read their own. The amusing aspect was that it was one of their

dentistry manuals and didn't really have many pictures other than of teeth, but she was telling them a story based on them.

He chuckled as he left the floating orbs of memories and walked down the halls again, curious about the various statues of minotaurs and other ghost-like things like what he fought before at nearly every corner. Had Hermione been fully rested, each one would have been set to capture him. But she wasn't. And they didn't.

As he walked, he began to move more efficiently, feeling less resistance and finding more memories of her childhood. He had seen her learning to ride her first bike and a large number of simple primary school days that made him realize just how alone Hermione had really been in her life in a way that hearing it from her in the tent while they slept together for warmth simply didn't get across. He always knew it wasn't quite the same as himself, but she really had been just as lonely and had wished for friends like he did.

"I don't understand," he mumbled to himself as he came to another dead end. "Why haven't I seen any stairs or ramps or something? This thing was huge on the outside."

It didn't take long for him to come up with a solution. "Well, if I can do it, then the others could, too. May as well try it." With a frown, Harry looked upwards to the ceiling and raised his hands, palms facing upwards and pushed. He wasn't really sure what it was, but he knew his body wasn't really here, so his reach wasn't, either. It had certainly worked on the outside wall. And whatever it was that actually made his body here reached forward and the ceiling gave in, pushing upwards and opening into a new level.

Harry jumped and he felt the floor above him pull as if it had its own gravity, bringing him the rest of the way in and letting him hit the ceiling of the next floor with a grunt.

He blinked owlishly as he realized the hole he made was now in the ceiling again, meaning he was either upside down compared to his previous location, or he was simply tricked into believing he had changed levels. It was as though every other level was upside down so floors and ceilings met.

"That's just weird," he muttered, deciding to see if he could find any memories that were either new or the same he had seen to find out if it was a different floor or not.

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Hermione couldn't believe what she was feeling! Harry had found a way to get through her various levels and whatever he did let him past through more than a single level at a time, letting him get to some of her medium-important memories!

That wasn't supposed to happen! Each floor was separate from the others! There was no way to them without passing through each of the halls in the right sequences and with the right timing! The inside of the monolith was like a three-dimensional maze with each floor being twisted and turned to keep things as complex as possible to prevent something like what Harry had just done, but it apparently didn't work.

'Oh no!' Hermione thought frantically. 'Not that one!'

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Harry couldn't hear Hermione's frantic thoughts as he approached a vibrant sphere that held a pinkish hue. The others had, up to this point, been blue, making this one stand out. "Oooo," he said happily. "This is new."

He approached with a smile and gently touched his palm to the orb, taking in the scene within.

"Hermione," Emma Granger asked, knocking on her daughter's door and popping her head through.

"Yea, Mum?" Hermione asked, putting her bathing suit into the hamper for cleaning that night. She had just come home from swimming with Harry and her parents at Potter Manor and still had a large, goofy grin on her face as she tightened the belt of her robe. It had been guys versus girls in water volleyball, and the girls had stomped them silly!

Emma came in and sat on Hermione's bed, gesturing for the young witch to sit across from her. "I sent your father away for a few hours

so you and I could have a chat about boys, hormones and sex," she said without preamble.

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed as she palmed her forehead. "I really don't need to hear this!"

"Oh, don't give me that, young lady," Emma scolded with a small grin. "You and I both know this conversation is long overdue. Especially with you and Harry spending so much time together and you spending so much time at school where we can't really have this conversation properly."

"But I've already read up on all of this and know how it works," Hermione said with a huff and an air of desperation. "And it isn't like I have to worry about those things right now. I'm not even in a relationship. With Harry or anyone else." Had her mother not been hinting that Harry was perfect boyfriend material ever since they had gone shopping, this conversation would have come as more of a shock. The topic of conversation would have been more uncomfortable as well, except that they had always been rather open about things, including nudity and the like.

Kind of hard to vacation at topless and nude beaches without being pretty open about the subject, after all.

"Hermione, I am your mother, but I'm also a realist. While I hope you'll make the smart and right decisions, I know what it's like to be caught up in the moment. I have no illusions that I can tell you to not do something if you want to do it. And the right time for various things depends entirely on who those involved are."

"Mom, I'm not sixteen yet and-"

"Oh Hermione," Emma sighed out, shaking her head in amusement. "I am sure age doesn't mean anything to you. You're more mentally mature than most teenagers old enough to have sex. You and Harry both, if I'm honest. Hell Hermione, at your age, I was in a relationship with two long-term girlfriends so I know exactly what you may get up to."

"What!" Hermione squawked, blushing lightly. That explained so much about Aunt Rebecca!



"Hermione," Emma whispered conspiratorially, "you are far too much like me to not have received a good many of my perversions."

Hermione gurgled somewhere in the back of her throat, which Emma dutifully ignored. The elder Granger woman knew she was pressing her daughter, especially regarding her alternate lifestyle at her age, but she was hoping to put Hermione at ease by being more like a co-conspirator than her mother right now. That, and teasing her daughter like this was a rarity and something that amused the hell out of her.

"I know I can't stop you if you want to do anything with Harry-"

"I am not dating Harry," Hermione interrupted with a sigh, which Emma also ignored.

"-and I'm not even going to try," Emma continued without missing a beat. "I'm just going to explain what you can expect and answer whatever questions you've got and the like. Basically, answer whatever questions you may have that I only wish I'd been able to get answered before I started. And besides, there's no way of getting out of this conversation."

Hermione sighed and leaned back, looking for sincerity in her mother's eyes. She found it, too. "Dad doesn't learn of this conversation," Hermione deadpanned, causing Emma to break into laughter.

"Oh honey, if he had any idea, you wouldn't be allowed to see Harry-"

"I am not dating Harry."

"-for the rest of the summer. Now, let's talk how far I think you can be okay with and then answer any questions about what you can look forward to later."

Harry's face after the instant in which he basically relived the memory was bright red. He learned far, far, far more in the past second or two about sex, and what Hermione expected with some of what her mother called 'stepping stones' to becoming a woman, than he had ever even considered before.

That book on how to please witches Sirius had given him didn't go into any of what Emma had told Hermione boys (and she had specified him, he noticed) almost always failed to pay attention to.

And he had no idea Hermione was that interested in those stepping stones!

"Hermione is going to kill me," he gasped out loud as soon as his mind was his own again. It was only pure shock and an absolute fear of his brunette-haired friend's wrath that had made him realize what Hermione was about to do when her mother had left. And the glimpse he had gotten of the girl under the robe would probably be the closest he would come before she killed him. Slowly. Methodically. Painfully. "Gonna kill me, gonna kill me," he began chanting as he backtracked at a breakneck sprint and made his way back through the original hole he created to the original floor and then rushed out of the monolith. The cold was actually welcome this time.

Harry wasn't totally sure how he was supposed to leave Hermione's mind after rushing back into the frigid air outside the huge building. In truth, the key was meant to be different to each person's mindscape. But, since it had been working up to that point, and staying any longer than he had scared him more than anything else at that point, he pushed his mental avatar to his own body as he closed his eyes before the rushing cold and the howling wind turned into the chatter of the common room.

He opened his eyes to see a massively blushing Hermione staring at him with her mouth agape. If he didn't fear the girl's vengeance, he'd probably think her widened eyes were comical in size. But he did fear the girl's wrath. He feared her wrath very much. "Please don't kill me," he begged in a little voice.

"I ... I ... I'm not going to kill you, Harry," Hermione said as she looked down and off to the side in embarrassment. She knew exactly how much and of what Harry had seen and had never felt so vulnerable than in that moment. "I ... said you could look and ... wanted you to test my defenses. I ... they just weren't strong enough. I ... we should go to bed, er! Sleep! We ... should go to sleep. It's late," Hermione forced out, trying her best to not just simply bolt out of the room and not look at Harry. She wanted to put up a strong front so he didn't realize just how embarrassed she was.

It didn't work, of course. Harry was embarrassed as well, but knew Hermione was much worse off and probably felt vulnerable. He had just strolled up to a very personal memory and he knew, with years of getting to know the girl, that apologizing just wouldn't make things better. She would appear thankful and let the incident slide and would truly forgive him for witnessing it, but she would still be embarrassed and possibly a little hurt that he found such a personal memory.

But, considering something similar had happened while they were together in the tent during what would have been their seventh year at Hogwarts during the Horcrux hunt, he knew how to fix this. At least a little. He would just do what she did when she walked in on him when he was bathing. Act like it wasn't a big deal and try to play it off like it was nothing big while trying to put them on equal ground. She had seen him in his entirety at that point and he had only seen her stomach and her hands disappear under her robe. So this was certainly not quite as bad in the serious-factor. At least in comparison.

"Not yet," he said, making the blushing girl look up at him in shock and a little amount of horror that he wasn't allowing her to leave yet. Granted, she knew she could at any time, but that he didn't agree right away was ... well, it was going to make things awkward, she was sure.

"What?" She asked.

"It won't make things any less awkward, but it would at least put us on equal footing if you saw some of my embarrassing memories, too, right?" He asked, doing his best to look curious and not as hopeful as he felt. He had come back with one major rule for his friendship with Hermione: be a better friend to her. That included being as honest as possible. And, if he wanted to let her know what he thought of her without having to say it, occasional coward he was when it wasn't life-or-death, then why not show his own fantasies?

"What?" Hermione asked with wide eyes and a new blush. 'He isn't really offering what I think he is, is he?'

"Well, I saw something that was more personal, so I can show you the same. That way, you don't have to feel funny about it alone. It'll

be like a little secret we can share. Do you want to see some of my fantasies or dreams about that stuff with you?"

Hermione hesitated, actually wanting to see them and being too embarrassed to actually admit as much. Harry had been giving off a lot of signals the past three months and if she were honest with herself, she wanted to believe in them, but she never really thought anyone could feel that way about her. Now ... now she had the chance to see exactly what he did feel about her.

"I just figured you may feel more comfortable if we were on even ground since you'll see some of mine about you since your mom found it funny to keep saying my name," Harry said, trying to give a tiny nudge and carefully not bringing up what she had begun to do when he left the memory. He had never really planned on something like this, but he was willing to do anything to keep her from withdrawing from him. Even let her see how he had thought of her.

"J-just to make us square?" Hermione asked, her embarrassment fading at the idea of knowing Harry thought about her in some naughty way, meaning what he told her when they went shopping wasn't just some charity case where he wanted her to feel better. That, and he was giving her a way to make it seem more like a way to make them even than making her feel like she was perving by watching his fantasies.

Being caught up in her own thoughts and embarrassment, she never really noticed that him having these thoughts of her meant that he was the one perving on her.

Harry nodded. "Whenever you're ready."

"A-are you sure you want me to?" Hermione asked, feeling like it was only polite. "I mean, if I see your ... fantasies about ... me ... Well, they might be private and you might not want me seeing them."

Harry smiled warmly at her blush, even as his stomach twisted into knots as he realized he had no idea what all she would be able to see. He prayed to whatever gods may be listening that his Inner Hermione kept the ... raunchier ones locked away. "They're definitely private," he mused, "but you have the right to know about

them and it makes us fair and I trust you to not hate me for them. I don't mind."

'He's got a lot more courage than I have,' Hermione thought to herself as she raised her wand.

"Legilimens."

"It's really creepy how quiet it is in here," Hermione muttered as all life was suddenly gone from the common room she found herself in.

"I always thought it was kind of comforting," Harry said from behind Hermione, startling the brunette who turned with a gasp at his voice.

"You should really stop appearing from where I can't see, Harry," she scolded. "What are you looking at?" He was staring at a space above her head and following it up and down with his eyes in what she called his 'thinking face'.

"I'm just kind of curious about what kind of probe or lead I may have had in your mind," he said, looking back to Hermione. "I don't remember seeing one. Definitely not a glowing gold rope like you've got."

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "It was like I was able to see you from a top view from high up, even when the ceiling should have been between us. I just ... always knew where you were and could watch you move about."

"I guess it's something to focus on next time," Harry said with a shrug. "Up the stairs to the girls' dorms, you should find a door that leads into a room with dreams and fantasies and the like with your name on it. Just come back when you're ready."

Hermione's mental avatar blushed, actually letting off a small aura that had the lightest shade of pink that he almost didn't notice it. "Alright. Are you sure you want me to-"

"It's okay, Hermione," Harry said as he sat on his couch and decided to explain at least a part of his reasons. "I trust you with everything I am and everything I have. That's why you've basically got unlimited access in here. I feel like I could ask or tell you anything without fear of reprisal. All this is, is me trying to point out that I know what I saw

was personal, and I want you to know you can trust me with that sort of thing just as much as I feel like I can trust you."

Harry blushed and looked away slightly. "Sure, you'll see some of the things I've thought about you and see how I've put your face on some of my fantasies, but that type of thing is natural."

At least, that's what she told him before. In the long run, it had made him feel much better, but the conversation was still a little awkward. But, getting this far meant it had been helping so far. It certainly should have, anyway. It was the method Hermione, herself, had used, so it had to have been something that would make sense to her. That was what he was hoping for, in any case.

"Just ... promise me you won't be angry with me for this?" He asked in a small voice that was different from before.

Something overcame Hermione and, since the moment Harry saw her memory, she felt assured and confident for the first time enough to take the few steps to him and hugged him gently. "It is natural, Harry. And unless you're imagining hurting me in any of those, I promise I won't be angry."

"I'd never think of you like that," Harry said with a frown. It was odd how he was suddenly the one who was feeling insecure and embarrassed. "Go ahead."

Hermione didn't say anything else as she walked up the stairs and turned right, finding herself facing a door labeled "First Year", but without any names. Curious at the lack of any other doors, she walked up the stairs at the end of the hall and too a second landing that was pretty much identical, but labeled "Second Year" instead and still without any other doors.

"Odd," she mumbled, heading up the stairs to the third landing and stopping suddenly as she saw Harry standing at the end of the hall. "Oh! Harry, stop popping up like that!"

"I'm not Harry," Harry's lookalike said in a frightening monotone. "I am a guardian. No one may pass beyond this level without defeating me. I warn you for being important to my creator; my speed, power, reflexes, strength, vision, hearing and ability far surpass what my creator is currently able to utilize. The only way to defeat me is to be

better than The Creator's mind. Once defeated, you would then have to beat the other defenses, assuming you survived long enough to see them."

Hermione felt a chill race up her spine as the entire speech was delivered in the same heavy monotone and the only part that she could tell moved was his eyes that stared into her own. "O-okay," she said, looking away from the guardian and noticed two doors on this floor. One was labeled "Third Year" and the other was her name, just as Harry had promised.

"Am I allowed to open the doors that don't have my name on them?" She asked, more out of curiosity to see how far her access really went.

There was one second of hesitation where the guardian's eyes glowed green before they returned to normal. "Yes. Warning shall come to anything you may not access. Speak with The Creator to alter your privileges."

"Thanks," she said, not sure how to take this version of Harry. Somehow, she felt that this was a possibility for how he could have turned out and was totally against allowing it to happen.

"Your thanks are not necessary."

Hermione allowed herself to stare long enough to blink before turning to her door and opening it and stepping through so she didn't have to stay near the creepy Harry.

"Eep!" The brunette jumped slightly as the door closed behind her. The room she was expecting would have looked much like a bedroom or dorm room, but it looked more like the Great Hall.

With a large, marble statue of Hermione right in the middle, dressed in the barest amounts that looks almost Roman in design, causing the real Hermione to blush. The cloth that was used to cover her statue appeared frozen in the middle of a strong wind, showing off the statue's tummy and legs and Hermione couldn't help but wonder at the oddities of Harry's mental structures because, just as the girls roaming the hallways, this version of Hermione appeared older and slightly more developed.

"What is it with boys and girls' bits?" Hermione mumbled as she looked around. After a dozen feet, where the statue stood, the room beyond was lit by what could only be nearly a million orbs floating about like fireflies. "How the hell am I supposed to figure out what to look for? Or even look at them?"

Hermione frowned at the ten-foot tall statue. "Nothing to say?" She grumbled, half expecting an answer. Everything else in Harry's mindscape could apparently speak. Sighing, she looked at the glowy orbs in the room, noticing an interesting number of blue-white ones, probably the majority of them, and a few that were various other colors, alternating between pink, red, dark blue, black and even five gold ones that shone so intensely, they almost looked like tiny stars.

They naturally gathered her attention.

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Harry sighed as he lost sight of Hermione up the stairs and sat back in the plush couch, more nervous than he was even a few seconds ago. Before, he had Hermione, to focus on. Now, he was alone with only his thoughts.

The same thoughts Hermione was about to look at.

He had never planned on this. Truth be told, he had never planned on letting anyone into his head. He knew he would tell Hermione his secrets, but she wouldn't have to be in his head to learn it. So, he put everything in its place and made sure his plans accommodated hiding future memories so thoroughly that even he would have trouble finding them.

Well, to be honest, he had given that job to the Hermione up in the Headmaster's office for a large portion of it, which was why he was so worried. He knew there was no one he could trust more than Hermione for anything.

But they did disagree on occasion.

"I have got to stop doing things on impulse," Harry groaned as he palmed his face. Then he remembered something. "Wait. I always relived the memories when Snape broke in... Oh crap."



By some unholy coincidence, or the depraved hand of Fate, the very first flashes went through his head.

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Hermione's Avatar looked around curiously, seeing the students in their Defense Against the Dark Arts class, as proven by Lockhart's presence, and listening to the fool blather on about his fake exploits. This was obviously a fantasy memory because all of the students were apparently much older than they would have been in second year and the real Lockhart would have never been seen in a chicken costume.

Nor did he lay his own eggs.

Hermione would also never be caught dead sitting at the back of a classroom, where she and Harry were talking in the middle of class! 'Honestly! I'm talking in the middle of class?'

"Harry, can you speak in Parseltongue whenever you want?" Dream Hermione asked Harry in their bubble of space where the world seemed to ignore them as seemed to happen during dreams or daydreams.

"Pretty much," Harry admitted, smacking Hermione's hands.

Dream Hermione scoffed and put her hands under Harry's, now attempting to slap his. This was one of those games she felt was pointless, even in a fantasy. "Did you know snakes don't have ears? They only hear vibrations."

"Uh, no. Not really," Harry admitted in confusion.

"It's true," Dream Hermione stated. "They have cavities in their bodies that feel vibrations, meaning they can 'hear' anything as long as it makes pulses they can feel."

"But everyone else can hear me," Harry said, yelping as Dream Hermione's hands smacked his and left a stinging palm print.

"That's all sound is, is vibrations," Dream Hermione stated. "So, if it's within the decibel level we can hear, we'll hear it too. But I was wondering, do you feel your tongue move when you speak?"

Avatar Hermione's eyes widened as she realized what her other self was thinking. During second year, it was something that several muggleborn girls in the upper years had commented on. She never realized Harry had heard of it, too!

"Uh," Harry pondered before Dream Hermione had an idea and held her hand up with the back facing Harry.

"Here. Speak in Parseltongue and let me see if it feels different."

Harry shrugged and did so, making Dream Hermione's eyes cross as her body shivered. "Oh my... Low ones."

"What?" Harry asked as the class was apparently dismissed.

"Harry, it seems your tongue vibrates when you speak in Parseltongue and, I guess it releases magic to make it work or something, but there's a rather interesting activity I think I would like to introduce you to."

"Is it fun?"

"I'm sure I'll love it," Dream Hermione said. Smiling and with a rather excited gait, she dragged her friend somewhere much more private.

Hermione's mental avatar squeaked when her dream self dragged Harry into a broom closet, that looked more like a luxurious hotel room inside, with a smile and shut the door. She saw the rest of the world around her fade to bleary gray and the only thing that remained in detail was the door, which she hesitated only a moment before opening and peeking through.

"You do have a vibrating tongue!"

Then immediately shut the door again.

"Oh my god," Hermione said as she imagined herself being back in the room in Harry's mind with her eyes closed. "How did they get naked so fast?"

She had a brief moment where she considered going back in and watching, but decided it would be better to see others and find out what she could of what Harry thought of her.

It wasn't as if she couldn't finish that one herself, after all.

Hermione let the gold orb float away from her, swallowing as she wondered if there was something specific about the colors and if that meant he only had five naughty thoughts of her like that.

'One way to find out, I suppose,' she thought, looking at the next one from the corner of her eye as if hoping to sneak up on it. She didn't really want to admit that she was hoping for something similar. It was ... liberating ... knowing that someone she knew respected her thought of her that way. Granted, seeing it was a little more advanced than she really cared for at the moment, but she certainly understood that those thoughts were normal and wasn't unfamiliar with them herself.

It was just such a taboo thought that she could be a focus of one of those types of fantasies that it surprised her. But ... it wasn't exactly bad. Just not something she was used to. It was actually kind of flattering.

She approached the second glowing gold sphere and reached out to touch it.

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Harry gasped as he was released from the first memory Hermione found, so far beyond embarrassed that he wasn't sure if he should make a hole under the couch to crawl into or just crawl into the mouth of one of the dragons flying about.

"Note to self," he mumbled, "set all pervy memories into a hidden place. Or maybe let each dragon hold onto some."

Then he began to relive another fantasy starring Hermione, only this one had been one of his own creation and not from a dream.

"Oh god! Why isn't she leaving this one?"

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Hermione nibbled her bottom lip as she watched her other self and Harry play in the pool at his house. That wasn't the part that had her breathing deeply or staring so intently.

It was that they were naked. Still playing with each other, though. They also looked just like they did now, which suggested this was a very recent fantasy.

And this time, she couldn't pull herself away and watched until the end.

The very loud, screaming, ... climactic end.

"I know I'm supposed to be seeing some of his fantasies, but ... oh my god... I wonder how much he really knows about these things?" Hermione mused to herself as her doppelganger threw her head back as a second ... end ... hit her. "I also wonder how in the hell he knows I've got a freckle there..."

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Hermione sat in peaceful silence, smiling gently and warmly as she watched the scene before her play out. Her mind and body were flooded with contented, happy feelings as she watched Harry and herself, and what was apparently four of their own children opening Christmas presents in a moderately-sized, comfortable home. The kids were opening their presents with wild abandon while two somewhat older versions of themselves, perhaps twenty years from then, sat and cuddled on the couch and watched.

This was obviously not a memory because she certainly didn't have children and her own parents were also dancing in the background, a little more gray, with a few wrinkles and swaying gently to an older Christmas song without lyrics.

There was also an older, smiling and balding man that Hermione didn't know removing every sign of mistletoe that was hanging up and adding booze to eggnog and an older, pregnant Luna playing tug-of-war with three other kids around the tree that had her blonde hair, sticking out wildly and messily, each trying to get to be the ones to eat the popcorn from the decorations; each already had a pile of candy canes behind them.

"Thank you, Hermione," Harry whispered into the older girl's ear, hugging her tightly and kissing her behind the pink-tinted ear. "I love you."

"You always get lovable and cuddly during Christmas," she accused gently, blushing as she raised a hand behind his head and turned enough to kiss him on the lips.

"What can I say? Christmas isn't Christmas without family. You taught me that, and I will never forget it."

Hermione hummed in the back of her throat as she coaxed his hand down to rest on her robe-covered tummy. "Well, you've got one more present coming. A girl, this time."

The real Hermione's mental avatar barely withheld herself from crying. This memory sphere had been the warmest and most impressive one she had come across until she realized what this memory really represented: a very deep longing for a family.

A very large family, apparently, but still a family.

It was humbling in a way that little could really be. Many people craved and fantasized over power, fame, fortune or being someone important. But Harry, who always had those things, wanted nothing of it and preferred to look for and fantasize over being something common and simple: a husband and father! He wanted to be a part of a family! What kind of thirteen-year old really fantasized over that!

She was now a fourteen-year old girl who shared a room with thirteen-year old girls and she knew that when they dreamed of having a family, it was usually by means of some man who had those things that boys fantasized about getting! They wanted to marry into fame, power, wealth or strong circles of influence.

Those dreams and fantasies tended to become more realistic as they got older, of course. Hermione knew by now she would rather have a partner than someone who had those 'perks'. But what she wanted in a partner was still something she had never put all that much thought into.

Harry, apparently, didn't have that problem.

"How can you already want this?" She asked quietly, not being heard by the others in the world around her. "How could any thirteen-year old boy want something so simple as his deepest desire?"

Hermione hugged herself as she watched the older versions of herself and Harry cuddle, finding herself longing for something like that. Something meaningful and with so much promise. She wanted someone to hug her and love her like that.

The brunette sighed and looked away from the scene, not really sure what exactly she was feeling. The only one she could recognize was jealousy over a dream. A dream of all things! Hermione just knew she didn't want to leave the memory from that location, so she walked out of the happy room and down the hall, passing the smiling portraits of their large family without a glance in case they would confuse her more, and then willed herself to the room in Harry's mind.

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Harry watched as Hermione went through a few other memories, some of various times with the two of them in their past and some that were actual fantasies he had either thought up or dreamed for what felt like hours. Though, that was just because each fantasy lasted a good time and she began staying in them after the first. Her confidence in watching the fantasies and memories raised with each viewing and she had begun to care less about keeping a balance between the two of them and more about watching forbidden moments and more about the spheres where it was some form of daily life that hadn't actually happened, which meant they were dreamed or fantasized, which caught her attention.

She had begun to notice a pattern to the spheres. Fantasies held a tendency to have the two of them, or whatever their dream selves focused on, in high detail, while the rest of the fantasy was blurry and inconsequential. Memories and dreams, however, were all vivid and sharp with all details in excellent resolution and, other than rules that didn't seem to exist in real life like Lockhart being in a chicken costume, appeared normal for all intents and purposes.

After ten more of Harry's memory spheres were observed, he stared forward while blushing profusely as Hermione came down to sit in a chair across from him, also blushing and having mixed feelings about everything she had seen. She enjoyed the knowledge that he thought of her as a girl, and even thought of her as an indication of having a future, but as interesting and warm as that was to her, it confused her thoroughly that ... she actually liked it. She was more than just a helper with homework and one of the guys. Hermione knew she was important to him.

"Does being a Parseltongue actually make your tongue vibrate?" She asked, being unable to keep herself from it. There was really so little information in the library about it. It was only briefly mentioned in a book about magical abilities she had picked up when she learned about the magical world, which was the only real reason she knew about it when he spoke it in Lockhart's dueling club. She also felt it was a safer topic than about his fantasies about the future or how he used that ability on her dream-world self.

Harry's blush intensified, but he nodded. "Yea."

"Oh," she said simply, wondering at what that could actually mean and how he figured that out.

"You're not ... mad at me, are you?" Harry asked nervously. "I mean, I know I didn't ask to think about you or anything, but-"

"It's okay Harry," she interrupted him with a small smile. "It's ... kind of flattering to know you don't just see me as one of the guys or some ... genderless thing. It may be a little more naughty than I expected to see, but it's natural and normal, just like you said. I don't mind."

Some part of Harry that had developed while sharing a tent with Hermione made itself known, and casual banter from a time when amusement was low and romances were close to forming flowed from his mouth before he was even aware of it. "So, I've got your permission to think naughty about you?"

Hermione squeaked in surprised and nervously looked to the side. "Er ... yes," she admitted before grinning and looking at him. "Assuming I can do the same."

Harry blinked, but took this as a good sign of things to come. "Sure. If you ever need material to work with, just let me know. I'd be happy to assist you in any related endeavors."

'This round to you, but the war shall be mine,' Hermione thought to herself, unable to think up a suitable response.

"Maybe we should go to bed, get some sleep now. It's late and I'm exhausted."

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While Harry and Hermione were playing in each others' heads and bantering back and forth suggestively, Luna, being a good little Ravenclaw and wanting to get started right away just like all the others, was working on her Charms essay for October to explain the amorphous history of how Charms were used in the past compared to their current uses. The charms classification she had selected were very difficult, rarely known and even more rarely used, so she was using the Ravenclaw common room library's referencing system, created by a muggleborn using some system by a man named 'Dewey'.

The man had way too much time on his hands. But the Ravenclaws reaped the benefits.

Her particular Charm class was something her mother had expounded upon before Luna was even born: illusions. Magicals used a smaller, bastardized version of what they once wielded in the form of glamors, but at one time, they were able to create entire plays or change the environment. Her own mother used illusions to create a place to send their minds to teach her faster than true time would allow.

Now, they did nothing more than hide pimples or boils or made themselves look like someone else, usually for naughty role play or nefarious deeds, just because most people now lacked the ability to do more. It really was quite sad.

Her mother, Celeste, believed that it was at least partly the result of declining mental faculties of wizard-kind. Whether it was because they closed their minds off to look at things with short-sightedness, mating between closer and closer family members or because of



such a strict adherence to old ways of thinking and acting, the elder Lovegood woman had never been sure of. As abilities decreased, the number of squibs in existence also seemed to be on the rise, making her wonder if it was some form of punishment to man for some evil deed they had done. It could have also been that there was only a set amount of magic within the world and the number of users caused it to be weaker for all parties, but a series of tests Luna had never been privy to had proven that to not only be a foolish sentiment, but laughable. Celeste Lovegood had been able to prove, and only a month before her death, that magic was the single-most abundant form of energy in existence, proving that even if all creatures in the world were magical, there would be more than enough to go around and still have much left over.

However, now that Luna had written her notes and copied all of the information from the books she thought she would need and written her outline, it was time for bed. It would really be quite wonderful to do her homework with her friends. They let her sit wherever she wanted, though both Hermione and Harry seemed to find it amusing when she sprawled across their laps so they could read their books off of her back.

She didn't mind though. They were warm, which was the whole point. She also loved the physical contact. Before Harry befriended her, she never really received a touch that wasn't meant to hurt her in some way; pushing, hitting, hexing, forcing her to drink or eat something, taking her clothes and other such things. It really got very tiresome after so much time and so many occurrences. She hadn't realized just how used to it she had become.

Which was part of why she was so thrilled with their cuddles, in whatever form they took. Even if she had to sprawl out in their laps so they could use her back as a table for their reading materials. And they wouldn't tell her 'no', either. They tended to readjust, sometimes moving pointy elbows out of sensitive locations in Harry's case, but continued to let her sit with them. Or on them. Luna wasn't picky. She could really never get enough of them.

So, she gathered all the information she could possibly need to take with her to the Gryffindor common room now while most everyone was doing extensive revisions and the Ravenclaw common room was too populated to fear any kind of prank. Their personal library

books weren't allowed to be taken from the common room, so much of the House's upper years were present even with the late hour.

"Another essay and one step closer to valuable research discoveries," Luna said to herself with a fond smile, thinking of her mother. She put everything into a knapsack and disillusioned it, thankful Harry had taught her the spell in case she had to make it to their common room without clothes again. She immediately used it to start hiding her bag and homework so it wasn't taken again. A quick sticking charm to the wall seven stones up and three across, chosen as magical numbers just in case, and she didn't have to worry about anyone tripping over it.

Luna hummed to herself as she skipped over to the stairs and up to her dorm room. She couldn't wait until third year when students in Ravenclaw got their own rooms for late-night research, even though the communal library books couldn't be removed from the common room. It wouldn't stop things from happening, she was sure, but at least no one would have to see the results before she could clean them up.

Luna continued humming as she took off her robe and opened the curtains on her bed and saw the inside of her curtains and sheets covered in blood and her mother's glassy eyes staring back at her, her clothes singed and her body broken and savaged.

Luna dropped her robes and covered her mouth, stepping back as she muffled a scream before choking back a sob and falling to her knees. 'Mama!' She bit her fist and tore her eyes away from the sight, closing them and trying to will the vision away before opening them, hoping it was gone.

It wasn't.

A horrified sob broke through and she dashed from the room, tears now streaming down both cheeks, and out of the Ravenclaw common room.

"Looks like the confundus actually worked," Mandy said quietly, waiting with the others. A quick glance around showed that those who saw Luna's mad dash just shook their heads and went back to work, while the others in the room didn't even bother to look. "I didn't

think a confundus could be used to make her see something specific."

"I was hoping to hear her scream, but crying works," Marietta admitted, correcting her Potions essay so Snape didn't get his crusty knickers in a twist.

"A confundus doesn't normally make you see anything, just get confused and make it easier to make you think you saw something while not really being able to remember what in any definable detail," Cho explained, making notes on her Charms essay on how she added various charms to get a specific effect. "It makes you suggestible. By adding the compulsion to it, it explained what she should see and using the Lestat Principle, I made it something she's seen in her past, either real life or a dream."

"Impressive," Marietta said with a nod. "So what did she see?"

"Her worst memory or darkest fear based on it. She'll know it wasn't real, eventually, but it seems like it was frightening enough to keep her from thinking too clearly right away. I decided to see if I could replicate the dementors' effects using charms and it appears to have been a success. But in order to claim that, I would have to retest and get the same results, of course."

In the hallways, Luna wasn't concerned with whether or not what she saw was real. It was horrifying and painful and there was really only one place she wanted to be to make the pain go away and feel safe again.

She practically flew through the halls and into the Gryffindor common room, not knowing if she even gave the password and then up the stairs to Harry's bed where she crawled in next to him and slowly wrapped her limbs around her sleeping security blanket, taking a shuddering breath as he unconsciously wrapped his arms around her.

Soft sniffing woke Harry, making him aware of the shaking body in his arms and the warm spot on his chest. "Luna?"

"H-hi Harry," she mumbled into his shoulder, still shaking heavily. She was suddenly glad that only Ravenclaws really seemed to stay up so late in their common rooms and dorms on Friday nights. From

the number of snores, all of Harry's dorm was apparently asleep, something she hadn't even considered until that moment. Or if any were up, it wasn't in Harry's year. They didn't seem to care about staying up past midnight. If anyone else was up and about, they probably weren't where they could get caught doing whatever nefarious deeds they were up to.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" He asked, looking over what he could see since she was holding him too tightly to pull away from her to do a more thorough job. She was a tiny girl, but she had a grip like a vice.

"Ju-just a b-bad dream," she said, holding him tighter. "I k-know Hermione s-said I shouldn't slu-sleep with you, but c-can I? Just tonight?" She looked up and into his green eyes, her own silvery ones, now turning dark blue and tear-stained cheeks begging him to agree. "Please?" She whispered.

Harry doubted he'd ever be able to deny Luna something she asked for. She always went out of her way to be as accommodating as possible and never ask for anything, so when she did, it was rare and meant everything to her. More than that, she was fully dressed in her daytime clothes, which meant she hadn't been sleeping, so she lied to keep him from doing something stupid. And he had learned the last time through his life that her eyes only turned blue when she was crying so hard they actually hurt. "You can always stay with me, Luna," he told her gently and quietly in an attempt to help the shaking girl calm down. "Hermione didn't want rumors to spread, but none of these guys will do that." 'Or else,' he mentally added.

"Thank you," Luna said with a sniffle. 'Just don't let go.'

"You sleep now," Harry said, wrapping the blanket tightly around them. "I'll be here when you wake up."

Luna sighed and curled more tightly into a ball under his arm, taking comfort in his warmth and embrace. She felt him kiss her forehead gently and most of the hurt left with his lips.

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The first Saturday of October bloomed dark and dreary with thick fogs covering the school grounds, due in part to the horrible dementors' influence and in part due to the time of year. Harry awoke with cold toes burrowed underneath of him and found Luna laying straddled on top of him and cuddled into his chest with her feet bent so that he was laying atop them, keeping the little digits warm as she drooled onto his chest and her fingers clutching his shirt.

At least she hadn't taken the covers this time.

Harry had noticed a trend in the blonde girl's sleeping arrangements that both made him feel proud, and furious. Most nights, she spent her time with Hermione and apparently hearing some rather amusing things when the bushy-haired brunette was asleep before her arrival, which was every night save two that were filled with talking. He wasn't sure what they spoke about, but was glad Luna was able to gain a friend in Hermione that she hadn't ever really had the first time around. His prospective love had been just as bad to Luna as Harry had been, not that either of the two girls were aware of that. But Harry was, and that was part of why he was so determined to take care of Luna, no matter what he had to face or do to do it.

She was his friend, and becoming more important to him as time wore on. Her friendship with Harry was sincere and, if he were honest, almost frighteningly gracious. She gave of herself and tried not to discuss or bring up her problems unless either he or Hermione forced it from her, usually by finding Luna after someone played some cruel prank on her.

And knowing how bad she had things right now, and how it never seemed to stop, made Harry truly sick to his stomach when he realized he was aware of all of this before coming back in time and he had not only purposely ignored it, but he ignored it all because he was ashamed to be near her so he wasn't lumped in together with her.

In only the one month Harry had been her friend after his return, Harry knew without a doubt that he truly enjoyed the girl's company and her views, something he had not been comfortable considering before. They were refreshing and she was one of the few people who showed who they truly were and spoke their minds around him.

When all was said and done, he liked Luna. She was a good friend, both in this time and in his past, and she deserved far better than her lot in life. And he would never betray her again as he had before.

"You seem to be thinking a bit harder than necessary for this early in the morning," Luna observed sleepily as she yawned and arched her back, pushing her hands into his chest to raise herself a little before flopping back down on him and burrowing into his warmth.

Harry smiled and hugged the girl to him gently. "Just thinking about friendship and how great it can be," he told her. 'And how crappy a friend can be, too,' he finished in his head.

Luna grinned warmly and molded herself to his side as she slid over a touch and fell onto his mattress. "It's certainly great," she agreed. "I'm glad to have friends now. I don't ever want to be alone again."

"You won't ever have to be, Luna. I promise."

Luna looked up and into Harry's eyes with such a sudden and piercing gaze that Harry's own eyes widened. "Do you really promise?" She asked quietly.

"Of course," Harry agreed, trying to sound as sincere as he felt with as little of the sudden nervousness her expression incited.

"Then it would be okay to tell you you've got bad morning breath?"

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Hermione yawned as Luna led her into the Gryffindor common room, still wearing her paw-print pajamas and really wishing Harry would have let her sleep until she had to wake up. "This had better be good, Harry. I've not been sleeping well and I could still get another two hours before I have to get up."

Worse yet, with this little meeting, it would throw her usual schedule all out of whack. There was no way she could do her work down here if it was already being used.

"I've got something to show you, both of you," he said, indicating both girls. "I'd like to keep it secret for as long as possible, though."

"What is it?" Hermione asked, letting her blonde friend curl into her side for warmth. Luna certainly was a cuddly little thing in the mornings.

"Get dressed and I'll show you. I think it will really help with your studies, too." Harry could almost swear he saw his bushy-haired friend's ears twitch.

"Fine. You take the cuddle-bunny, I'll be down in a few minutes."

Twenty minutes later, Harry was pacing back and forth in the seventh-floor corridor, causing a door to appear, which he opened and showed both curious, and now wide-eyed, girls. They looked in to see a comfortable sitting room that looked like a much smaller version of the Gryffindor common room with the Hogwarts library right behind it. Both female heads bobbed to the side to see a window on the same wall as the door, showing there shouldn't have been anything beyond the wall, and then back into the room.

"I don't really know how to respond to that," Luna admitted simply.

"This is the Room of Requirement, or the 'Come-and-Go Room' as the House Elves like to call it. The creator of the room can make it shift into whatever they need while inside, or walk back and forth three times in front of the door while thinking of what they need and it will provide it to the best of its ability," Harry explained, ushering both girls in and closing the door behind them. "Whoever's in control of the room stays in control, too."

"Nothing it makes can be taken out of the room, though. So you can't create medical supplies or food and then take it out since it is still like a standard conjuration. You can even use it to recreate areas based on your memories or libraries, but only with books that have been in Hogwarts or someone who's been in Hogwarts has read before. But I've been using it to create a place to exercise in and practice dueling."

"So, I couldn't recreate the archives from Alexandria?" Hermione asked with a rather put-out expression, causing Luna to giggle.

"Not unless Dumbledore is a lot older than he lets on," Harry said with a smirk.

"What about ghosts?" Luna asked while checking under the furniture, curious about what she may find hidden underneath. "The ghosts in the Headless Hunt come by almost yearly and a few of them were alive during the period."

"Uh, I dunno," Harry admitted, looking lost for a moment before shaking his head.

"This can recreate the Hogwarts library? Even the Restricted Section?" Hermione asked, nearly vibrating in excitement.

"Yes, but for some reason, I can never copy the books," Harry said, knowing what the girl was thinking. "From what I understand, everything is a construct of magic, just like conjuration. But unlike copying a book with a spell, since they aren't copies of an original, it's like it doesn't want to work. I don't know exactly. I'm just guessing. But at the same time, I can't even make a copy of a book I brought into the room, either. So it could be some sort of protection."

"What else can the room become?" Luna asked, molding a handful of dust from under the couch into a small giraffe. She suddenly began to contemplate a bunny... a dust bunny, if you will...

In response, Harry pulled both girls close, quietly noting that they didn't fight his actions or even ask what he was doing and merely wrapped their own arms around him and each other, and began to cycle the room between each common room, the Great Hall, the library by itself, the Burrow, Luna's home, Hermione's home, a large field, a lake, Potter Manor and even a few fast food restaurants he had visited over the summer that he had always been curious about. Several places flashed into and out of existence around them, sometimes putting them in small areas that made their closeness a good thing, and showed a wide range of recreational abilities the room could provide.

"Oh, that is amusing!" Luna chirruped happily, hopping in place as she clapped. "Can you have it create wildlife?"

"Yes," Harry said, creating the field scene again, complete with dozens of rabbits, a few birds and a large number of cats.

Then there were a few less rabbits...



"Whoops," Harry mumbled, quickly creating the original room again.

"Make it create a Snorkack," Luna demanded with a weird glint in her eye. "Many Snorkacks."

"What's a Snorkack?" Hermione asked, wondering at the topic shift. She had heard Luna bring them up before, but they hadn't gone into detail, really.

Suddenly, the original room was filled with lemur-like creatures, half of which had mouse-like ears and the other half had bunny-like ears, though the ones with bunny-like ears also had little, rounded bone horns sticking off of their foreheads.

"They look a lot like the Thundercats, only monkey instead of feline," Hermione mused while Luna rushed the little critters with a battle cry that sounded suspiciously like a 'squee' and tried to catch some.

"I can't believe I've never tried that before," Harry mumbled with wide eyes. They wouldn't have been created without actually existing, which meant Luna got a lot more grief than she deserved over the things in her dad's newspaper. 'I wonder who knew about them before. Luna has always gone on about them, but claimed to have never found them.'

"You're right, Harry. This room should help our studies tremendously," Hermione said happily, pulling off one of the bunny-eared animals from the book it was gnawing on. "I can also see why you want to keep it secret. If everyone knew about it, we'd never get to use it."

"Well, if one person makes the room, and someone else makes one, it will support both separately. I don't know if there's a limit to how many, but I know it should support at least a few different users at once unless they ask for the same thing. I thought about using it as a place to get extra sleep, but decided against it since I don't get up too early for it," he told her, smiling internally as her eyes widened and she realized what he was suggesting. Harry wasn't sure if she would sleep there or not, but if she did, then no one could disturb her. He'd talk with her in a few days to possibly see about dropping Muggle Studies and Divination.

If he could figure out how to do it, that is.

"My tummy is rumbling," Luna told them, bringing over an armful of struggling Snorkacks. "I think it's time for breakfast. But can we come back?"

"I agree, on both counts," Hermione admitted, looking longingly at the imitation library behind the blonde girl.

"You can come by any time," Harry said, leading them towards the exit. "Just try not to tell anyone for a little while or let them follow you here." At a later time, when Hermione was more awake and didn't have so much knowledge at her fingertips, she would question why Harry didn't share this magical room with Ron.

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"Oh wow," Hermione said after swallowing a muffin. "Look at this." She handed over her copy of the Daily Prophet for Harry and Luna to read.

The Founders Are Back!

By: Allowwin Lyez

Yesterday around mid-day, the Wizengamot chambers were being cleaned for a meeting when the member chairs were in a new formation. It was determined a total of five chairs were added to the active seating arrangements. Gryffindor, Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Potter all are now active.

The chamber has not had anyone enter for nearly four months, so it is unknown as to when all the chairs became active and many are looking forward to finding out who holds these seats since three have been long-thought to be dead lines.

On another, possibly related note, the Potter seat is now active as well. Could this mean that Harry Potter, aged thirteen, has taken up his Lordship? Could James Potter, who died before he could take up the mantle of Lord Potter, have faked his own death to hide from the Death Eaters during the war, possibly leaving his only son to the clutches of You-Know-Who?

We at the Daily Prophet are looking into genealogy lines within the Ministry to see who the most direct descendants are of all four founders, but it is a slow process and we ask our readers to be patient while we scour the records and look to this publication each day to see our progress.

A Wizengamot session is still scheduled for its bi-annual meeting in nearly six weeks on November twelfth and we will learn who the mystery seat holder(s) happens to be.

Harry gulped as he set the paper down and looked to Hermione who was watching him carefully. "W-wow! All four Founders," he said shakily.

Hermione quirked an eyebrow, but nodded slightly once, indicating she understood. "I agree. It should be interesting to find out who took control over the families." The brunette took a bite of her breakfast while thinking, 'and it should be interesting to find out why you are hiding so much.'

"You have no idea," Luna said in shock, rereading the article. "The Founders are considered royalty in the wizarding world! They created our standard of living and the foundation on which we've built our entire society! Before Hogwarts, all magic was either self-taught or done through apprenticeships. It's also said that Hogwarts, the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade and even part of Diagon Alley is owned by them!"

"Really?" Hermione asked, intrigued. "That's a lot of land and businesses."

"Makes sense, though," Harry reasoned out. "Buy the land around the school, and then allow a magical community, it would generate revenue to keep the school functioning, at least in part. And it provides an easier source of food and a place for older years to let off some steam when things get stressful."

"Daddy also sent along your first issue of the Quibbler," Luna said, pointing out the owls coming with the paper.

"Morning guys," Ron yawned out, sitting beside Harry and filling his plate.

"You're up early for Saturday," Harry pointed out while Hermione asked for and commandeered his Quibbler to see what had made him want it since Harry was still eating.

"Yea, McGonagall said I had to turn in my essays before she had breakfast or she'd mark it as a failing grade," the redhead grumped, still resenting that his friends didn't tell him they were due earlier. It didn't matter that Hermione wrote them for him almost a week ago. He didn't rewrite them and Hermione's handwriting was much too neat for his work. He learned from that mistake in first year. They never told him they were coming due so he could rewrite them the night before, and that was what mattered.

"Then maybe you'll complete your assignments sooner," Hermione not-so-subtly suggested without looking up from where Luna was pointing things out.

"Yea, maybe," Ron shrugged, biting into a mishmash of breakfast items. "Hey Harry, what are you showing everyone at the thing next week? More Patronus stuff or something better?" Ron asked, hoping for something awesome during the dueling club. Hopefully something to use against the Slytherins.

"I was originally planning on shields again, but I think I'm going to work on dodging first," he said, glancing at Luna, who was still talking to Hermione. "I just need to think of the best way to prove it is necessary to dodge rather than block." Harry allowed his gaze to flit over to the Ravenclaw table where he was looking for prey for a poignant demonstration. 'Maybe something that'll get a message across.'

Cho Chang shivered so violently the eggs on her fork were flung across to Marietta's plate and into her lap as a feeling of foreboding washed over her.

"Cho! What the hell!" Marietta exclaimed, wiping the egg off her clothes.

"Dodging is so boring and a lot of work, though," Ron said around his toast. "Shields are much better."

"Shields fail," Harry said simply, speaking from more experience than the redhead could possibly imagine.

"Harry, could you pass me the nanners?" Luna asked, pointing out the bananas to his side. She proceeded to make sandwiches out of peanut butter and banana slices while Ron spied the headlines in the Prophet.

"Bloody hell! The Founders are back!" After a few seconds of reading, he looked at Harry with wide eyes. "Whoa, Harry! Your seat on the Wizengamot is active, too! Do you know how your seat opened up? Or do you know who the Founders are?"

Hermione stared at Ron with her mouth agape, honestly not believing what she was hearing. She glanced at Harry and noticed his scared expression. Apparently, he didn't know how to respond to that. She didn't know why he was hiding this, but assumed it was probably for the fame aspect. "I know wizards aren't supposed to have the most common sense, but this is ridiculous," she muttered to herself.

"Hm?" Luna asked, swallowing her sandwich. "Why do you say that?" She dropped several strawberries into her milk and began to mash them mercilessly, sticking her tongue out the side of her mouth and curling it up in concentration. She'd show the lone surviving 'nanner' who was boss in just a moment, as well.

"I've seen some wizards in the muggle world," Hermione explained, watching the senseless slaughter of fruit in front of her. "They can't even get the way muggles dress right. Snape even used a logic puzzle to guard a priceless item in our first year that was actually very simple."

"Oh," Luna said quietly, leaning closer to Hermione and speaking very softly. "You mean how it isn't likely a coincidence that all of those seats became active at once and almost no one seems to be noticing that?"

Hermione blinked at Luna, feeling somewhat ashamed that she had lumped the blonde girl into the same category. "Er, yes. I mean, look around. Everyone is talking about this, but normally they're all staring at Harry whenever he's involved in something, but they're all

chattering on about 'Founders this' and 'Founders that' and completely ignoring him."

"Not exactly a bad thing," Luna murmured as she drank her fruit smash, looking at the green-eyed boy who was trying to sidetrack Ron with talk of Quidditch.

"True," Hermione said with a small nod. The only ones who seemed to be paying Harry any attention was parts of the staff, Ginny Weasley who always seemed to be looking at him, and Draco Malfoy, who was glaring more than normal.

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'This can't be happening!' Albus Dumbledore screamed within the safe confines of his mind as he poured over his Daily Prophet. 'Harry cannot have access to so many potentially dark resources! I can't allow him to become another Tom.'

With a deep breath, the Supreme Mugwump stepped forward and began to make floo calls. He had to reverse this travesty. He knew Harry was emancipated. The boy had said as much in a letter to him over the summer. But Albus was not aware he had learned so much of what he was capable of and what he had access to. What was worse, he knew who the descendant of at least one line of the Founders was, and all four becoming active meant that either Harry was in cahoots with someone else, some unknown entity that he couldn't guide or control, or there was far, far more to Harry Potter than even the Great Albus Dumbledore had been capable of learning.

He honestly wasn't sure which would be worse.

"Albus?" Minister Fudge asked in surprise. "What can I do for you?"

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Harry sat in an empty, unused classroom after telling his friends he had to visit the loo. He had originally used the Room of Requirement for his reflecting needs, but Hermione and Luna had all but barricaded themselves into it, engorging themselves on books from the Restricted Section.

He was lost. He realized he had no idea what he was supposed to be doing and was beginning to question his actions and path. And his reasoning was very simple.

He had already failed! Many times! And in the worst of ways, at that. He died.

Now, he was thrown back in time and told to get it right because there would be no more second chances and other than orders to move out, train and get emancipated; he wasn't told what to do or where to go. He had no ideas where Voldemort's horcruxes were other than the few he already knew about and still wasn't sure how to find those he hadn't been able to find out about. And he had already died trying to get one of them! Going back now would be pointless since he still didn't know enough about warding and trying to get Dumbledore to help would be all sorts of trouble.

In all honesty, the whole purpose of the dueling club he was in charge of was just an excuse to get the students better-prepared for the fighting that was sure to come and so he had an excuse to practice dueling and learn more than the school was teaching. All he could really think of to plan for the future was to do what he knew had already been done, sooner, so that it could help and be out of the way, but after that? What was he really supposed to do after that?

"I miss going to Hermione with my problems," he admitted to himself. "Or just venting together with Luna," he considered, thinking of his fifth year talks with the quirky Ravenclaw. The blonde girl had a vicious streak in her when she would hear of someone getting hurt unless it was herself and she loved to help him think up pranks to get back at the others. Harry was beginning to think they weren't all original, either.

He looked around, half-expecting and half hoping that Lora would pop in and give him more advice, sighing after several seconds when she didn't show up. "Okay. Let's try thinking like Hermione. What do I need?" He pondered for barely a second before snapping his fingers happily. "A list!"

Harry pulled out a parchment and quill and began writing.

Voldemort:

Horcruxes, Death Eaters, Kill.

War:

Resources like potions, food, protected location, weapons other than wand if it's lost? Maybe armor from basilisk skin? Information sources?

Allies like goblins, house elves ... um, owl army? I suppose Hedwig could try to help or something.

Personal:

Physical, mental training, try to learn more wandless magic, emergency portkeys?

Harry sighed deeply as he looked at what was an admittedly short list. But oddly enough, it made him feel better to have made it. A part of him felt like maybe a piece of Hermione was right there with him at that moment and he didn't have to keep all of his thoughts jumbled in his head, now.

He couldn't really do anything for the horcruxes. He was at school and didn't know enough to keep himself alive considering the wards that had killed him this last time. "Actually," he thought aloud. "The tiara, diadem thing is in the Room of Requirement. I can get that one-" his eyes widened and he shot out of the room, shoving the list into his pocket and pushed his legs as hard as he could up to the seventh-floor corridor, suddenly more thankful than ever that he had taken up running. "No, no, no!"

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Dobby belly-crawled his way over the beams of the Malfoy home's arched ceiling, using only his fingers and toes to move himself forward as he made his way through the home, taking note of any books he could find that he felt should rightfully belong to his master, the great Harry Potter.

The excitable creature knew he couldn't use magic. Lucius had been so infuriated by his loss of his slave to Harry Potter that he had called in debts that were owed to take two other house elves who



were now bound to the blonde death eater and they would detect magic in a moment.

Apparently, Lucius had wanted something so far against what he had once before that he had obtained two female elves in place of the male and forced them to wear quite literally nothing, ensuring they were aware of their constant shame. They were more aware of that than ever when he took them to his bed chambers for the first time when he didn't even share them with his wife. Lucius Malfoy would keep these elves broken so they could never take the initiative to help out one of his greatest enemies. Dobby wasn't sure exactly what happened in there. It was impossible to find out without using his magic, and the other elves were tasked to kill any house elves that showed up and used magic that weren't pre-approved. But each of the female elves came out worse in the mornings.

Dobby had gone through as many safe houses as he could find that he knew had once belonged to the Malfoy family and emptied them of every potion, book, weapon, wand and movable item and left only a pile of elf poo in the middle of each floor as his own, personal message. Magic ensured each figure looked like his former master.

The tiny house elf had gone through an awful lot of fiber to get each and every floor properly ... conditioned.

But, Lucius Malfoy had sworn loyalty and all that was his to the Dark Lord. Dobby's master, Harry Potter, defeated the Dark Lord as a baby and twice since then, even. By magical rules, everything that belonged to the Dark Lord then became Harry Potter's, including that which belonged to his minions.

That somewhat unorthodox line of thought is what made Dobby feel he was rightfully charged to help his Master Harry Potter with what the house elf felt he needed.

So for now, Dobby was playing scout and mole, going into the death eater's den to see what was needed and how best to help Harry Potter.

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"Albus, we've been over this," Fudge whined once again. "Potter's emancipation is legal and complete. We checked and the paperwork

was signed by his guardians, which you yourself are on record as having selected for him. Unless he does something illegal or proves himself unfit to govern himself, then there is nothing that can be done. You know this! Stop trying to force me into a position I can't back up."

"I am not asking you to overturn his emancipation," Albus soothed the ruffled politician, even though that was exactly what he had, in fact, asked. "I am merely suggesting an order to assign a proxy to his Wizengamot seats or to bar him from participating due to his age and to restrict his actions as an adult while he is still actually a child. He does not have the wisdom or knowledge to sit in that chamber. He is much too young."

"His family ring accepted him, Dumbledore. The laws in place allow him to sit his seats for himself and to be held to the same laws as an adult. His family line is too old to fight. It's one of the oldest Pureblood lines in existence. The laws favor such things far too heavily. You know that! You wrote some of them over a hundred years ago."

Dumbledore frowned, still wondering how he was unable to repeal his own laws. "He is still young. He could prove to be detrimental to the whole process."

"We have no choice, Dumbledore. Either he selects his own proxy of his own accord, or he sits for himself," Fudge said firmly. What he wouldn't give for control of those votes!

Dumbledore nodded gently, thinking to manipulate the man into bending the laws a little for 'the Greater Good', but was worried about being found out later on down the line. He normally did such things without fear of reprisal, knowing most people would take his word when he told them he had a good reason and not to delve too deeply into it. Sadly, that wasn't the case with pureblood politics. They would question his every motive and every move he took, fearing any potential loss of power in a domino-like effect. If Dumbledore could take one seat from them, then what was to stop him from others? The Potter seats were amongst the oldest currently active, if not the oldest, that was for sure. As such, they had the highest number of seats-by-proxy than most of the others, outclassed by only three other families. Taking control of that by

force would be nearly impossible. Many have tried and failed in the past.

"I understand, Minister. I was merely trying to do what was right, for the greater good. I do hope your resilience won't cause any disruption in the factions."

Dumbledore got up and turned, leaving, well aware of the stricken look on the Minister's face. 'If I cannot remove him, my only choices are to get him to renounce his emancipation, admit me as his proxy or prove him unable to take care of himself, one way or another.'

Plots of accidents of childhood actions and ignorance began flashing through his mind, coming to the fore with thoughts of the future and Harry Potter's destiny. He would fight Voldemort. He would die, one way or another. It was inevitable.

Another thought struck the aged Headmaster. All of this talk of the Founders and their descendants gave rise to another situation. Perhaps it would be best to take care of an issue of heirs at the same time as having one of those accidents?

'Yes. I do believe that would be best,' the headmaster thought, stroking his beard as he meandered to the men's loo for a quick respite. 'It appears I will have no choice but to speak to a few people and activate a few plans ahead of schedule. A suitable mate will have to be chosen. He has shown a substantial liking to Miss Granger and Lovegood ... What is that muggle saying? 'Do not put all your eggs in one basket'? Yes ... And young Miss Weasley could be a good fall back option as well. He certainly has strong ties to that family. Perhaps Miss Brown. She's got quite a few admiring glances from the young lads lately...'

'Then again, causing the death of one of his friends could be even better. Such a waste of life, but necessary for 'the Greater Good'. That is what makes this all acceptable. All for the 'Greater Good'.' Dumbledore pondered on who the best candidates were for his plans, determining those who were useful and those who were expendable. On one hand, there was the option to create life, but that could be spun in a way that could be totally opposite of what he wanted to happen. After all, Harry was now the last of his family line and these were the people who demanded that pureblood lines continue. On the other hand, he could take a life, proving Harry unfit

to pass judgement for anything, much less a body of leadership in their government. Decisions, decisions.

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"Hermione! Luna!" Harry rushed into the Room of Requirement, slightly relieved to find it looking like an exact replica of the library and not a storage room or something with a possessed girl laughing darkly over the body of the other.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Hermione asked, rushing out of the bookshelves and waving her wand about, followed closely by Luna who held hers more at the ready by her side, neither wearing anything shiny upon their heads. "What happened?"

Harry's shoulders slumped as he sighed in relief. "Could I borrow the room for a couple of minutes? Nothing's wrong, I just need to use it for something really fast."

"You ran in here like there's a mountain troll at your heels just to ask to borrow the changing room?" Hermione asked in surprise. "I thought you said it could handle multiple people at once."

"It can," Harry confirmed, feeling rather small at the moment. "But, there's something I need to do with it and I don't know what it will do since I'm asking for its natural state, which is a room filled with a bunch of junk and no magic. It'll just take a moment," he finished, trying to usher the girls towards the door.

"Harry! We can walk on our own!" Hermione exclaimed, wondering why Harry was pushing them. Luna just kept leaning back into his hand with a maniacal grin, making him push her the whole way.

"This is more fun, though," the blonde said through a giggle.

"Sorry," Harry said, shutting the door and pacing quickly, causing another door to appear. "I'll be out in just a second."

Harry rushed into the room and shut the door before either girl had a chance to come in after him, knowing he was going to be in trouble for it later. Still, he transfigured the crumpled list he had made earlier into a large leather satchel and then summoned Ravenclaw's

diadem into it before taking the time to shrink and store the vanishing cabinet that had been forgetting about in there as well.

Sighing at what could have been a horrible disaster avoided, he opened the door to find Luna playing hop-scotch on the castle floor's stones and Hermione standing directly across from the door, her arms crossed under her breasts and glaring at him. It was a surprisingly impressive sight. "Er..."

"You could have just asked," Hermione muttered, watching Harry grin weakly back at her and rub the back of his head. The bushy-haired one couldn't help it. She forgave him instantly. "I'll expect a suitable act of forgiveness for this horrible, atrocious act of utter barbaric behavior, of course," she said primly, sticking her nose up in the air.

Forgiveness didn't go hand-in-hand with not watching him squirm, of course.

"Er, what did you have in mind?" Harry asked.

"Back massage!" Luna chirruped, hopping from stone to stone without missing a beat.

"How about you copy the books we noted to get in the library later today?" Hermione asked, wondering if Luna's suggestion may not be worth merit as well. Harry's hands had begun rubbing gently and kneading tense muscles when they were lounging and reading and both girls had fallen asleep against him more than a few times.

"Done and done," Harry said with a grin.

"Does he know we've already marked down several dozen?" Luna asked, coming up to them.

"I don't mind," Harry said with a smile. "As long as it's reasonable."

"Don't worry, Harry," Hermione said warmly, placing her hand on his upper arm affectionately. It was something she had done many times in the past, but after the night before, she suddenly felt a jolt of adrenaline shoot through her body as memories flashed through her mind's eye. "We won't overextend you. We'll just have you get half a dozen or so."

Harry chuckled as Hermione and Luna went back into the room after refashioning it to its previous appearance. He turned and left quickly, making his way to the one place he knew no one could ever hope to get at the newly acquired Horcrux without him being aware of it. "Hello Myrtle," he called out as he entered the girl's restroom.

Strange how he didn't feel awkward about that...

"It still surprises me that you keep coming back," Myrtle said, visible from only the nose up from the sinks at the side of the room. "I wasn't expecting you to come back until tomorrow for our Sunday talks."

"Something came up," Harry said. "I was wondering if I could ask a favor."

"Oh?" Myrtle asked, narrowing her eyes. She had been wondering when this would happen. No one ever wanted to talk to her for real! "What kind of favor would that be?"

"This," Harry began, holding up the leather satchel, "holds something very dangerous. It's something that Tom Riddle left behind that can possess people permanently. Hermione and Luna almost stumbled on to it, so I wanted to put it somewhere they can't ever get to and take it down to the Chamber until I learn how to fix it. I was hoping you wouldn't tell anyone about this so they don't ask about it."

"That's it?" Myrtle asked. No spying? No helping to distract to take pictures of naked girls like the Weasley twins once asked? No helping to hurt anyone? Help her friends remain safe and not possessed by the evil monster that ordered her death? Why did Harry asking something so small, and make it sound so big, seem normal?

"That's all. No one can go down to the Chamber until I learn how to break whatever enchantments are on this thing."

"What is it, though?" Myrtle asked, now intrigued despite herself, floating closer inch by inch.

"Don't get too close," Harry warned, pulling the mystery item back. "I don't actually know how it would affect a ghost and would rather you not have to find out. It's some of the darkest magics around and deals with necromancy. I don't think that'd mix well with spirits."

Myrtle backed away so quickly and with such a stricken face that Harry almost felt bad to warn her of that much. "Why on earth are you carting it around, then!" Myrtle screeched in a tone of voice most people knew her by.

"Would you have rathered Hermione or Luna activate it?" Harry asked rhetorically, frowning at Myrtle.

"Well, no," Myrtle allowed slowly. "But would they have known how?"

"The type of item it is, and what they would know it to be, would make them use it like it is intended, which would activate it almost immediately. I know them. They wouldn't even think twice if they knew what it was and would be lost forever," Harry said gravely. He actually didn't know if it would be permanent, but he knew Ginny's only hope had been removing the horcrux diary when it was stealing her life force. Whether it was possession or killing the girls to get his own body, it was not something he could allow.

"Okay, Harry," Myrtle agreed. "None of the other ghosts know about the Chamber, as far as I know, and I won't go down there without you. I've tried to look about but can only seem to go through the door when you opened it and can't go through the walls, so it'll be safe down there if you want. To be honest, I've been thinking about taking a trip that would probably have me gone for a while, so I wouldn't even be here to try."

"Huh? Where are you going?" Harry asked, wondering what the girl had in mind. She had never left before as far as he knew. She was infamous for always wailing and crying and peeping on boys.

"There are many things ghosts are famous for that I haven't tried yet," Myrtle said primly. "I decided there are some that I'd like to try, but I can't do them here because everyone knows me."

"Like what?"

"Haunting people," Myrtle said with a silvery blush. She had made herself invisible and moved about enough to practically know every piece of gossip in the school, and even things that no one else was privy to. Such as Harry's home life. Hermione had written her fears to her parents, which Myrtle just happened to read about, or information that Madam Pomfrey had in each child's medical files. The Dursleys were very bad people, all three of them. Bad and muggle. They wouldn't see her, but she could certainly ruin their happy little lives for a little while.

And stop up the toilets. It wasn't as though she weren't used to doing that on those who were mean to her now.

"Oh," Harry said with a blink. 'I guess that's something she probably did in the past and I just didn't notice. It can't take that long to do that and get tired of it and come back.'

As quickly as he could, Harry deposited his haul still-shrunken and with a sticking charm to the inside of Salazar Slytherin's nose in the bust of the face that the basilisk had once come out of and left, not wanting to remain any longer than necessary. He had been lost when he realized how close to danger Luna and Hermione had been and not even realized it. Now, however, Hermione had once again helped him and hadn't even been aware of the assistance she had given him.

'That girl deserves a cookie or something,' Harry thought. 'Hm. She does enjoy those sugar quills...'

It was a relatively small thing, at first, but it was a seed that could grow to help him in his end-goal. The dueling club would eventually be working things where he couldn't help everyone at once.

"We won't overextend you" Hermione had said.

"The girl's a bloody genius," Harry muttered, watching Neville from a small area near the greenhouses. He had several people to meet, and this was one who he knew could really help while helping himself at the same time. The boy was just too skittish to approach around moderately dangerous plants.

But not too skittish to approach right after leaving said dangerous plants.



"Hey Neville!"

"AH!" The Longbottom scion dropped his books and spun around, fumbling with his wand and dropping it into the grass before looking up at Harry in shock. "H-Harry! What ... er, are you doing?"

Harry smiled slightly as he helped Neville pick up his things. "I was wondering if you wanted to help me out next weekend with the dueling club. I'm going to be doing shields and am going to train a ... er, teach a few people shields in advance to have help walk around."

"What?" Neville squeaked, his pudgy cheeks reddening. "I-I can't do that! I'm not a good wizard! I-"

"Neville," Harry cut the other boy off before he had a nervous breakdown, "I know how powerful you are. I can sense it. Your wand fights you every step of the way and you can still make it work. I know you can do it. And it's very simple. I'll teach you everything. Do you want to at least try?"

"Y-you can sense magical power?" Neville asked in wide-eyed awe. "I always thought that was a myth!"

"When you try to use the wand, yes," Harry admitted, finding he actually was able to feel magic when someone was using it. It was rare and wasn't something that made him stop to stare, but he had felt it on occasion. It was usually Hermione and lately Luna, and any time Dumbledore used wandless magic, but Neville had surprised him quite a few times. Even if the majority of them hadn't happened yet. "You tend to have to put a lot of magic into a spell in order to force the wand to do what you want, which both makes your spells wonky and proves you're quite strong since you have to be strong to last as long as you do with so many overpowering spells."

Neville's blush was brighter, but not enough so to overpower the obvious signs of pride: head held a little higher, shoulders not hunched as much and a small smile.

No one had ever said anything so kind to him! That he, Neville Longbottom, could be not just average, which he had always dreamed of, but actually powerful!

"I-I'll try," Neville mumbled, much of his sudden courage leaving him.

"That's all I ask, Neville," Harry said with a smile to ease the boy's obvious fear of failure. "Meet me in the antechamber to the Great Hall at seven after dinner, yea? And make sure to eat well. You'll want the energy."

Neville nodded once and Harry turned to leave, jogging to where he knew the Hufflepuff common room to be. 'Time to get Scary Susan, Howling Hannah and ... Cedric.'

Cedric was something Harry had been debating with himself over for the past month. When he had seen the boy during the return to Hogwarts, he had realized the Hufflepuff could still be saved, but didn't really know how. Hopefully, by ensuring he didn't end up in the graveyard, that would be all there was to it, but if something happened sooner, or different, Harry had no idea how to save him. Maybe by letting him be one of his lieutenants in the dueling club, he would have the skills to survive long enough to get away.

Which was the whole point of the club in the first place.

Well, it was more a sneaky way to train his friends more thoroughly than they had before, but he couldn't exactly be discrete about it, so the dueling club had been officially created.

However, walking through the first floor hallways, he came across two others on their way to their own common room that he decided to invite as well. "Hey Greengrass, Zabini, hold up a moment!"

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"So what do we do, Potter?" Cedric asked as he, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot, Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom and strangely, two Slytherins, Daphne Greengrass and Blaise Zabini, gathered in the unused classroom on the third floor. There had been several curious glances as the group filed away, but by the time any student or faculty member decided to look, Harry had already lured them to a new location.

"First, Daphne, Blaise, get away from the door. This isn't a trap and anyone attacking anyone else will suffer far worse than they can

dish out before getting stopped," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the fidgety Slytherins. Not that he blamed them. Ron had been glaring at them since the beginning of dinner when he learned they would be learning in advance with the others. "Second, a bit of clarification."

"The entire point of this group in front of you is to learn advanced techniques compared to the others so that, when I teach something new, you guys can walk about and help in places I can't get to. In exchange, you learn more than they do, learn it faster and you'll get a galleon each session, or two a month."

"You told us that, Potter," Daphne said, watching the others for signs of foul play. "What you didn't tell us is why you want us to join your band of merry men."

"Hey!"

"And women," Daphne corrected, nodding an acknowledgement at Susan.

"I'm going to be working on basic defense from the ground up and I want to progress as quickly and efficiently as possible between shields and tactics. Since I'd ask you to do the physical stuff that makes this unhappy work, that's what you're getting paid for." Hermione had been a little upset at him for paying them all what was basically a hundred pounds for just showing up at the defense sessions and helping to teach such simple things, but Harry had plans for the future.

Specifically the Slytherins. Ron could glare and huff all he wanted, but he wanted to try and get some people on the inside who could potentially warn them of deceit or an attack. In his memories, Draco had allowed the Death Eaters to enter the school and kill with abandon and, while they had run them out, there were still too many casualties. And many of those within Slytherin were aware of what was happening. Harry had hopes that he could show them that whatever they planned in the future, he was now another choice and hopefully, he would be considered someone they wanted to work for and assist rather than blood purists.

These two, while having eventually become enemies in his fifth year, had never really gotten very bad. They stayed quiet in the Inquisitorial Squad that Delores Umbridge had created that basically

went around enforcing her will, and they didn't actually tend to take active measures against Harry or his friends. It was his hope that he could turn them to his side and his people first.

Worst-case scenario, he had to dispose of them quietly at some point to ensure they didn't hurt his friends. Yes. These were kids, but they were people he knew would become enemies if they were forced to choose, or just simply denied that choice. And the people Harry was fighting for most likely wouldn't give them the chance.

Probably the best thing about coming back in time from a state of war was his lack of hesitation to use former enemies in place of allies where they may suffer because of it. He was not cold-hearted, but he was hardened and would be ruthless if needed. And that was going to come forward.

It had to.

"We're getting paid for this?" Ron asked, his eyes wide and a grin stretching across his face. "Alright! Hey! Why only one galleon!"

"Ron!" Hermione scolded. "We're Harry's friends! If he asked us, we'd do it for free!"

"Not now we wouldn't," Ron rebuked with a scoff. "I'm not letting some Slytherin get paid for the same work I'm doing and not me!"

"Ron!" Harry barked out, making everyone jump and cutting off the two Slytherins' obviously heated retorts. "If you're going to be in this room and learn with us, you'll keep your temper down and be good! Disrespect will have you thrown out and you can forget being a part of it. I don't want dicking about in this, understand?"

"You're gonna let them-"

"They haven't done anything!" Harry cut the angry redhead off. "There is no middle ground. Be nice or get out!"

Ron rocked forward, barely stepping himself from taking a step as the thought of shiny galleons crossed his mind. "Fine," he huffed, crossing his arms and settling for glaring at the two in green-trimmed robes.

"Not to be mean," Hannah began, raising her hand. "But I think a valid question of why you have Slytherins here could be asked? I mean, as a general rule, you and them don't really seem to get along with one another. There's always been an obvious hatred, I thought."

Harry sighed, wondering how he got here and noticing everyone was watching him, but the two Slytherins most intently. "I'll admit I don't like Malfoy. Do I think he's evil? Probably not now, but he's heading that way. Most Slytherins are pureblood and the social hierarchy in the wizarding world almost dictates acting a certain way, and I bet it's much the same in their House."

The two Slytherins' eyes shifted to each other and then back to Harry. The Gryffindor was frighteningly well-informed.

"And I know that some families will use the actions of their children, or inaction, however they can. So, rather than make enemies of people whose parents are in a position to hurt their families, or themselves, it's just easier to go with the flow and not risk anything one way or another."

The two Slytherins were now somewhat more pale and shifting nervously as the eyes of the others flickered to them randomly.

"Is that what's happening?" Harry asked rhetorically. "I don't know, but it sounds like it'll work for me, so it's what I'm assuming. If I see something that proves otherwise, I won't discount it, but I'll always keep my eyes open, just like I will for anyone from any house, no matter how well I know them."

"As it stands, I don't see Slytherins asking for help from anyone if they can get around it and I don't see them accepting any that's freely given. They weren't too receptive when I was showing them the Patronus, though more than I had expected. I figure they'll get more help if it's someone from their own House."

"But you can't trust Slytherins-" Ron began, getting cut off once again.

"Not everyone who goes evil or dark comes from Slytherin," Harry snapped. "You told me that everyone who went bad was from Slytherin in first year before our Sorting and we've seen more than

enough proof otherwise. There've been plenty of people from other houses, too. I'm tired of arguing. Either accept it, or leave. Make your choice."

Harry watched again as Ron grumbled and looked away, his face and ears reddening, but staying put. "Good. Now we'll continue learning shields in the next school meeting, but after that, my plan is to eventually get you guys to wandless magic and-"

"What!" Multiple voices asked in shock, the only one remaining quiet was Luna, who was more focused on drawing a face and ears on a sock for future use.

"If you lose your wand, most people are no more defended than the average muggle," Harry explained. "It's actually not nearly as hard as you may think. It's just something that requires a lot more focus."

"Can you do it?" Blaise asked, his expression neutral.

In response, and figuring a show of strength would be better-suited than much else, Harry left his eyes locked on Blaise's and raised his arm, pointing his hand to the desk. Suddenly, a dark blue oval shape erupted from his hand, surrounded in what looked like neon purple lightning, and took flight with a dull whump before crushing into a desk, blasting fragments into the far wall and bouncing back, only to hit a shield Harry had also cast wandlessly, keeping the dust and debris at the far wall and off of everyone watching.

"Most of what I can do without a wand is ... er, messy," Harry admitted, looking sheepish. "My focus has been on combat-related magics and making sure I'm still standing, but my enemy isn't, so I haven't learned a lot that's useful other than those, but I thought I'd teach the summoning charm so you could reclaim your wand if it was lost."

Blaise's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Duly noted."

"Bloody hell!" All the other males said in awed unison.

"You've got to teach us how to do that!" Ron exclaimed happily.

"Later, perhaps," Harry said, not promising anything. Especially when the redhead was angry with him only a few seconds ago and

now was playing the friend again. It reminded Harry of the many times that had happened, both in his future and in the past already. "But you'll learn the basics to that after next week's school meeting unless you get the shields down pat before that."

"Now, the reason I brought that up," Harry began standing before the others with his posture radiating a presence that sent a thrill through the girls. In Hermione's case, this was that same version of Harry she had seen come forward several times, only now, it hit her with much more force as she acknowledged, silently, something she had been hesitant to do until that moment.

She liked it!

Luna was thinking much the same, though for her, she realized this was the Harry that she knew enforced his promises to protect her and the backbone of the Harry that would remain her friend, no matter what he had to suffer alongside of her for association. This was the pure essence of Harry Potter that was her friend, her confidant and ... damn if it wasn't something she wanted desperately to keep with her forever.

Susan and Hannah saw The Boy-Who-Lived and wondered secretly if all those children's books had actually been fiction.

Daphne saw power! Raw, unadulterated, controlled power. Power in Magic, power in Fortune, power in Politics and the power of simple Success. He could do the things he said he would do and would be firm in his loyalties. She and Blaise had accepted the Gryffindor's offer because they knew he wasn't likely to lure them to a trap and because it was an interesting idea.

Not to mention the spying opportunities.

Blaise was, oddly, a mix of thoughts between Daphne's and ... Hermione's.

"I don't want to teach the students wand movements, but focus and intent, which is basically the key to wandless magic. I don't even want them learning wand movements. That's why I'm teaching you in advance. If you ignore wand movements and incantations, you'll cast faster and can do more complex things like two spells in one."

"You never said anything about silent casting," Hermione said with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh...", Harry mumbled with a blush. "Uh ... Surprise?"

Neville snorted, then looked up at the others with wide eyes. "Di-did I do that out l-loud?"

"Don't worry," Cedric clapped the nervous Gryffindor on the shoulder with a grin. "Anything Harry's likely to do will probably end quick."

They all heard Neville gulp.

"Alright," Harry began with a smile, "I want you to pull out your wands and hold them steady in front of you and just imagine the magic going from you, through you wand, and then out the tip in the shape of a ball or a wall. Balls can generally take a little more punishment because they'll deflect some of the energy and not just block it, so are usually better, but a wall is easier to picture. When I think you're doing it, I'm going to start sending stinging hexes."

A few seconds later, yelps were heard in quick succession as various body parts were found to be tender.

An hour later, the group was heading out the door, rubbing sensitive flesh and groaning. Most of them had managed to make the shields work, but still needed a moment to think of what they needed strongly enough to make it happen, and the shields were as likely to shatter under the first hit they received, but the goal had been obtained. The shields were functioning. Only Ron and oddly Cedric hadn't managed to make them form other than once or twice in Ron's case.

"Harry, you're a right bastard, you know that?" Ron complained, ignoring Hermione's reproach about his language. "Couldn't you use tickling hexes? Or cheering charms? Why'd you have to use something painful? You got me twice in a row once, you know!"

Hermione refused to complain about Harry hitting her twice in a row as well. She had turned around in an attempt to dodge his spell and he had hexed her left butt cheek, grinning as he did so.



"If I used a cheering charm or something amusing, you would have been less-inclined to block them," Harry told him. "You wanted to block these, so you had more focus, drive and desire to do so."

Neville, who had been third behind Hermione and Luna, grunted. "Is it too early to ask for a raise, boss?"

As the majority of the others stared at the boy in shock for making a joke, Harry laughed. "Ask me after I see how well you can show this stuff to the others."

"I just want to take a long bath and go to bed," Susan muttered, unaware of Ron or Neville's blushes or sudden glances at her body. "That wore me out."

"Me too," Cedric admitted. "It's like it uses more magic than the usual method."

"Not so," Harry rebuked immediately. "It actually uses less or the same, but you can use more, which you will do when you start out. You have to learn to regulate the flow of your magic. If you imagine your magic coming out and hardening into a shell, then it does. If you imagine it rushing out of your wand and forming a shell around you that moves so fast it pushes the spell away before it breaks through, it'll do that. But that way uses a massive amount of magic, but could block far more."

Luna and Hermione looked at Harry quickly as he continued talking, wondering at the sudden implications of that statement.

"It all depends on how you control it. But I went through loads of my magic before I realized how to control it. I just always thought I had to push as much into it as I could to make it stronger. And it does, but it doesn't have to be for everything."

"This is where we split up," Blaise said, stopping at the end of the hall at the stairs. "Thank you for ... an enlightening evening. And may you suffer from bedbugs for the pain."

"Aw, I'll miss you too, Blaise," Harry said, grinning and putting his hand over his heart as if he had just heard the most endearing thing ever. It made the boy's stoic face crack just a bit as his mouth twitched.

Shame Harry hadn't been privy to his earlier thoughts.

"We're gone, too," Cedric said for himself and his two Hufflepuff friends. "G'night Harry. Ladies."

"Are you coming with us or going back to your dorm," Hermione asked Luna as Harry and Ron walked off, signaling to Harry that they needed a moment and telling them they were headed to the loo, which was true. It had been a long night after dinner, after all, and a lot of pumpkin juice.

"It's nearly curfew," Luna said. "I suppose I should head back so Filch doesn't get his knickers in a twist."

"Oh. I just figured you'd want to stay the night with me again," Hermione said casually. Luna had begun spending almost every night with her a week and a half ago, save for the night before with Harry. But those seemed different since she was less ... Luna in the mornings after those nights. She was extra cuddly, and almost attached to whoever sat closest to her between herself and Harry, and, if she didn't know what it wasn't, she may have been more worried with Harry.

Still, this was a chance to see if Luna would just rather sleep with a friend or if she actually had things happen that often that she couldn't sleep in her own bed.

"You mean I don't have to wait until someone does something nasty?" Luna asked, shocked. "Are you really going to just let me stay?"

Hermione swallowed. It seemed it was a bit of both. Luna appeared far too pleased and sincere to be otherwise. "It's easier than running about after curfew."

"I would like that. Thank you," Luna said softly.

"Can I ask ... Why don't you let us tell the teachers?" Hermione asked, wondering why Luna was willing to let things get so bad she couldn't even sleep in her own bed.

Luna knew Hermione was too intelligent to not notice what was happening, but she had hoped she wouldn't ask. "It will just make things worse. I have somewhere I can sleep if I get locked out and it isn't usually so bad I can't sleep in my bed. They've just been a little worse this year. If I go to a teacher, they will just get in trouble and then they will either get worse or I will not be able to prove it was them because they will leave less clues about, making the argument moot anyway."

Luna looked to Hermione and grasped her upper arm firmly, but obviously pleading. "Please don't tell anyone. It won't do anything but make it worse."

"I don't like it, Luna. They have no right to do those horrible things to you! I mean, you've shown up naked before! Harry's even seen you! Doesn't that upset you?"

"It's just skin," Luna admitted, feeling rather confused at the other girl's focus. "When I'm at home, I'll swim or dance in the glades, or even walk about the house naked. I actually prefer to not be clothed. I know it is the social norm, but I also wouldn't walk around Diagon Alley nakie, either. And, I know Harry's seen me, but he was very gentlemanly about it and seemed more embarrassed than I was. And he hasn't told a soul about it, so I know he doesn't find some form of accomplishment out of it."

"Harry wouldn't do that!" Hermione quickly said, feeling the strange urge to defend him even though she knew Luna knew better. There was also a strange sense of ... something that she wasn't familiar with. She could vaguely remember something similar from his letters during the summer, but it was certainly much less direct than this.

"I know," Luna said calmly, glad Hermione was now no longer focusing on her tormentors. "It's strange. I would feel bad if anyone but Harry saw me. Or any boys, at least. I don't feel awkward at all when you see me. But I also have no problems when I go to places with my father where clothing is scarce or ignored all together."

"I know," Hermione admitted, washing her hands. "I'm the same way when my parents and I go on holiday to places with beaches like that. I don't think twice about it, but here, I would rather not."

"Well, if you ever do decide to try it, I would recommend Harry's bed. It's really quite comfortable and he's very warm."

Hermione choked as her mind became active with possibilities. 'Why the bloody hell did I want to see his fantasies!'

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"Hey Harry, I've been meaning to ask you about something," Ron said after the girls begged off to go do something girly.

"What's that?"

"Those rock bracelets you've got. When did you start wearing them?" Ron asked, gesturing to Harry's wrists. "I usually only get a glance at them since you have been wearing robes with long sleeves an' all, but I remembered about them while you were flinging hexes at us."

"Oh," Harry hesitated, putting his hands down so the sleeves covered the items in question. I got them towards the end of the summer. A ... er, friend gave them to me."

"A 'friend', huh?" Ron asked suggestively. "Would that friend happen to be a girl?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yea, but I've only seen her a few times."

"Ah. That's good. I had been wondering if you were ... you know..."

"Know what?" Harry asked, truly unsure.

"You know," Ron gesticulated with his hands, trying to speak through them to imitate ... what was probably some elaborate dance or an entire conversation, Harry wasn't sure what. Eventually, seeing Harry wasn't getting it, Ron leaned in close and whispered, "you know, a poofier."

"I'm not gay, Ron," Harry groaned out. He was really beginning to wish spells would stick to the stone bracelets. He had tried disillusionment charms and Notice-Me-Not charms, but they wouldn't take hold for whatever reason. The magics he had tried to use to

hide them just before Hogwarts had acted as though the bracelets weren't even there.

"Just makin' sure. You wanna play some chess before bed?"

"I've been getting up early to do some exercising, remember?" Harry asked with a yawn. "And Oliver wants to get the team together tomorrow to discuss some Quidditch stuff. How's your plan for a club for that going, anyway?"

"Not great," Ron grunted. "Old McGonagall says I can't start a club like that unless I can get my grades up and I had to get my essays turned in earlier. You guys could have told me the end of the month was coming, you know."

"You know the date, Ron," Harry said, feeling rather put off that Ron was basically blaming him and Hermione for not telling him to do his work. "It isn't our job to force you to do your work. Everyone was told a week in advance to get them done and turned in and Hermione had even written your essays for you. All you had to do was rewrite them and then turn them in."

"I was worried about her!" Ron defended. "I couldn't do it 'cause she was acting all weird!"

"Making her do your work for you isn't showing you care," Harry scolded, actually sounding upset which Ron picked up on.

"Whatever."

The remainder of the walk to the Gryffindor common room was done in silence, both boys refusing to talk to one another. Behind them, all but forgotten, Neville was too worried and nervous to say anything.

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"Master's Luna will be joining his Hermione without going to her bed tonight," Spots told Twinkle as they followed Harry, Ron and Neville. They were sticking to the shadows in an attempt to practice their stealth, which they hadn't been working on since they found that the younger years, or almost any of the females, would provide treats.

Sweet, glorious treats!

But all things have to come to an end. At least until meal times when cuddles and treats were quite abundant.

"That's good. They did something to her sleeping area again to try and recreate last night's events."

"Forgive my impertinence, but myself and others are curious as to your reasons for withholding our retaliation against Master's Luna's tormentors. We are finding it increasingly difficult to stay our paws."

"I know. If I'm honest, I feel just the same."

"Then why-"

"Because Master will defend her. I can feel his anger swell each time he sees something that upsets him about her treatment and it has nearly reached a breaking point. But more than that, something is telling me that waiting will prove to be better. Not just because Master will take action, but something ... darker."

"Master's Luna...?" Spots asked, worried.

"Not to her, no," Twinkle assured his subordinate as their master made it to the seventh floor. "But ... something bad will happen that will define ... everything. And Master's Luna will be the harbinger."

"..."

"I know, Spots. I know. But whatever is guiding me, it is persistent."

Spots followed for a few more seconds before nodding with a fist to his heart and then he was gone. The others would need to know to keep the calm for a little while longer.

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October thirty-first, nearly a month later, found Harry sitting next to Hermione with Luna sprawled out in their laps as all three read their selected books. Both of the third years were contentedly stroking the blonde's long hair with their fingers while the second-year girl hummed a slow song gently as she wrote.

Ron was working feverishly on his essays, remembering the events from September and not wanting to have a repeat since the majority of the faculty had been rather clear on what would happen if he didn't turn in a single essay on time again. Luckily for him, the end of the month came on a weekend, so the students actually had until November first to turn in their monthly essays. Sadly, Ron's daily homework was a touch behind as well, so he was busy the majority of the day and stressing more than just a little bit.

Harry was marveling over how swiftly the whole month had flown by. Luna had slept every night in Hermione's bed save for two that she had spent with Harry simply because she 'missed her cuddle time' with him. In point of fact, Hermione admitted that they were the nights when her roommates had remained awake too long to allow the Ravenclaw to find her way to Hermione's bed without getting caught and the Thundercats had explained that her bed was trapped.

It was also somewhat disturbing how no one asked about Luna's nightly absences from her dorm, considering every single person there was aware of it. The faculty also found it curious to note that the Thundercats would only interact with the Ravenclaw first-years and would be somewhat cold towards all the other years. They didn't accept treats, even meat. They wouldn't allow themselves to be petted or cuddled and the last time Penelope Clearwater tried to give one an order, she found all of her clothing had been shredded, and all of the Thundercats had been preening about their claws, and a suspicious liquid in her shoes.

According to the Daily Prophet, no one yet knew who the holders of the Founders' seats was. The secretaries and archivists assigned to the task had all been assuming that whoever held them would take up a Founder's name in place of their own family name, but that hadn't been the case. So they had, until just a few days ago, been looking in the wrong place, which confused the article writers and those at the Ministry greatly.

But Harry knew it was only a matter of time before they found him out. According to the last article, they would be going back through the family lines in the archives starting with the most likely candidates, which were historically pureblood lines. Harry's was one of the oldest, but only because many others had been killed off. But it wouldn't be long before they discovered everything.

The dueling club had been an impressive array of successes and failures, sadly. An unforeseen problem had been habits. Older students, by and large, were finding Harry's methods of spell casting to be a great deal more difficult than the younger years. Surprisingly, with little actual instruction, the first and second-year students had taken to the lesson with almost no problems. And the upper years were getting quite upset over it.

If a firstie can do it, why then, can't they? And the little brats, according to several upper years, couldn't stop gloating. Or casting tiny little shields over the top of glasses so they couldn't drink anything. Apparently, the twins had been corrupting the minds of the innocent.

"Are you going to Hogsmeade today?" Luna asked as she stretched over both laps. Her friends were the cuddly sort. 'Maybe cuddly and nice go hand in hand?'

Hermione looked to Harry, silently asking what his plans were, which would indirectly include her since she didn't want to go without him; a change from his memories since she had been looking forward to the experience for the entire year.

"Yea. I definitely want to try it out. Do you want us to pick anything up for you?" He asked.

"That's okay. I was just curious if you were leaving or not."

"Not for long," Hermione amended. "It'll be nice to get out for a little while, but I expect we'll be back after not much time, certainly enough time to have lunch here with you. I really don't want Harry exposed for so long with Black out there." The bushy-haired brunette looked at Harry, silently asking if he was going to be a pain over the idea.

"Hey! Don't look at me," Harry exclaimed, raising his hands defensively. "It isn't my fault crazed, demented bad guys have a thing for little boys!"

"Honestly!" Hermione said with a small smile, rolling her eyes as she felt Luna giggle on her lap.



"I asked because the carriages will be leaving soon," Luna said, fiddling with a part of Harry's pants by flicking it back and forth. She didn't want them to go, but knew it was also unrealistic to spend every waking, and sleeping, moment with her friends. That didn't mean she didn't want to try, of course.

"Tempus," Hermione incanted, getting a quarter to ten. "It's really creepy how aware of the time you are, you know," Hermione said with a smile.

Luna rolled over her friends' legs to lay on her back with a grin. She hadn't understood it too much at first, but she knew this was a good, friendly form of teasing and relished in it. She still had to see Hermione's face to be assured it wasn't Hermione turning mean, though. "We all have our talents. You can find information from anywhere, regardless of how obscure and seem to always know relevant knowledge. Harry is always there when you need him and gives great massages and I am the Mistress of Time!"

Both Harry and Hermione smiled at the blonde's antics, wondering at their own histories with time-travel and hugged her, hoping she would change focus. It worked spectacularly. Luna hugged them back with such force it overbalanced them and made them top-heavy, making all three fall from the couch.

"Ugh. I've heard friendship means taking the good with the bad, but this is ridiculous," Harry grumbled from underneath the two girls where pointy elbows and what he thought may be a foot were crushing sensitive locations since he put himself underneath of them to cushion the fall as best as possible.

"That had better be the spine of a book, Harry," Hermione grumbled with a blush as she rose, disappointed that it actually was. It was also what Harry thought had been a foot.

Harry extracted himself and went upstairs as the girls went to Hermione's dorm for whatever Hermione wanted to snag. "Hey Ron. Are you going to Hogsmeade with Hermione and I?"

Ron looked up from the mass of wrinkled parchment and then back down. He only had two of his essays started, much less close to completed. But then again, he could always go and then finish when he came back. "Yea. I wanna go."

"Alright. What about you, Neville?" Harry asked the boy coming from the shower room.

"What about me?" The boy asked nervously. 'What did I miss?'

"You, me, Ron, Hermione, Hogsmeade, butterbeers and time out of Hogwarts," Harry said.

"Oh. Uh, sure."

"Ten minutes or so and the carriages leave. We don't want to walk. Dementors and bad weather and all that." Harry opened his trunk and got his wand holster, attaching it to his forearm and stowing away his wand.

The group met Hermione and Luna in the common room and made their way to the front doors of Hogwarts where they were stopped by an old man who had been scarce recently, spending a lot of time at the Ministry.

"Hello everyone. Mister Potter, may I have a word with you?" Dumbledore asked, motioning the children by and subtly moving so Harry remained in front of him.

"The carriages will be leaving in just a moment, Headmaster," Harry said. "Can it wait until after we come back?" Harry motioned Hermione and Luna who had waited at the doors to continue on so they wouldn't be late and make Hermione miss her ride.

"That is actually why I wished to speak with you. I would like to ask you to remain here in Hogwarts where it is safe from Sirius Black. I have seen you read the papers and am sure you are aware of his history."

"It was in the papers," Harry said simply, idly noting the carriages leaving.

"Exactly," Albus exclaimed with a smile. "It is for that reason you must remain safe in the castle. I was also hoping to ask you about your emancipation and if you may be willing to name me your proxy for the Wizengamot meetings so you needn't bother yourself with sitting in a stuffy old room with a bunch of elderly men."

"Name the man who was responsible for living in hell as the voice of my votes in a chamber where he makes decisions that affect the lives of countless others like he did with me?" Harry asked with a scoff, smirking when he saw Dumbledore's expression turn grim. "No thank you, Dumbledore. And I will be going to Hogsmeade as well. Have a good day, Sir."

Harry walked past the Headmaster and continued outside where he saw Hermione and Luna still waiting for him, even without any remaining carriages. "What are you still doing here, Hermione?"

"Well, I didn't want to leave Luna out here alone since she wasn't going and I didn't want to leave you behind."

"And now you can't take the carriages because they're all gone," Luna stated as the last carriage went along its way.

"That's okay," Harry said with a smirk. "I've got another form of travel. We just have to get out of the Hogwarts wards. You know," Harry said quietly, slinking over to Luna to whisper conspiratorially, "you could come with us. You just need an adult supervisor and I am emancipated..."

Luna giggled, taking a step back to play evasive. "Sorry Doctor Doom, but I would still want to ask Daddy's permission first. As fun as it would be, I wouldn't want him to be upset with me."

"I can respect that," Harry said with a nod. "Ready to go, Hermione?"

Getting an affirmative, the duo walked out of the courtyard and through the gates of the school. Hermione had given Filch her permission slip and Harry didn't need one. So once through, Harry hugged Hermione to him, waved at Luna and the two faded as their bodies seemed to slide to both sides as if fading out of being.

"That's certainly odd," Luna commented to herself, feeling sad to be alone again, even if it was only temporary. She spun around and began to skip her way into the school, smiling as a group of Thundercats seemed to appear out of nowhere and began skipping along with her.

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"Wow that was strange!" Hermione said as she looked around herself, finding it interesting that they were in Hogsmeade before the first carriages approached. She could see them, even now, about half way down the lane to the small community.

"Yea, it takes some getting used to," Harry said with a grin. "What do you say we get through the candy shop before the others show up so we can miss the sugar rush and then head to the book shop?"

Hermione grinned at Harry fiendishly. "You had me at 'book shop'," she said as she unwrapped her arms from Harry's waist and they went into the first store. Harry got several boxes of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Jellybeans, Sugar Quills, Chocolate Frogs and enough chocolate bars to last even Ron up to Christmas. Then he began getting an assortment of other items like gum drops and caramel candies to share with Luna in case she didn't care for the others.

"You'll rot your teeth!" Hermione exclaimed when she saw his haul as the other students began to dismount their carriages. Her parents would have heart attacks if they saw how much raw sugar he planned to ingest.

"It isn't all for me or for just now. It's partly to reward successes at the dueling club and because I know my dorm mates will want some. Ron tends to eat candy and ask whose it is later," he admitted, thinking of their sixth year when the redhead had secretly borrowed tainted cauldron cakes that Romilda Vane had laced with love potion that had poisoned him. That had been the first time his actions had affected him, but Ron had always taken his candies. Even in first year, he had eaten all of the chocolate frogs Harry's well-wishers had given him and taken the wizard cards out of them.

"Just remember to brush your teeth," Hermione warned with a frown, looking at his trove of sugary delights askance until he showed her the sugar quills.

"No worries. I'll get your candy, too. It isn't like it will add much more to my bill," Harry offered, seeing his friend with a single box of sugar-free gum. "It'll give you more to use at the book store."

A few minutes, and one shrunken bag of sugar-induced coma, later, the two were in the book store where Harry immediately lost sight of Hermione. "That girl is scary fast sometimes," he muttered, strolling over to the section on runes and warding, taking a copy of anything that looked promising. He would have to find a way to get past the deadly traps around the horcruxes he was aware of and how to destroy them.

After making his selection, he noticed another area that seemed much older where the books appeared to be as old as the store itself. It was all about melee weaponry and fist fighting. Harry dropped his hand to his waist where the Sword of Gryffindor rested at his left hip, virtually all but forgotten. Harry had become so used to its weight and moving it when he was sitting that he usually forgot the bloody thing wouldn't remain more than a hundred or so yards away before somehow finding its way back to his belt.

He had taken to shrinking it down to nearly be totally ignored and charmed invisible after an embarrassing misunderstanding with Hermione before she remembered that unique feature.

Still, if he had the silly thing, he may as well try and learn to use it. So he found the larger book on swords, noting the yellowed pages, fancy script and old-style word selections and added it to his pile as well. It would give him a good foundation to learn from and then maybe he could use the Room of Requirement for practical training. It was definitely unlikely to learn enough from a book to get good enough to not kill himself.

After nearly a half hour looking through books, Harry and Hermione took their purchases to the counter where Hermione found that she had totally forgotten the money pouch that her parents had given her for the year.

"Why don't you use the card?" Harry suggested simply. "It'll be a good chance to make sure it works since you haven't tried it yet."

"But it's your-"

"Here," Harry said, cutting her off. "We'll get mine at the same time. This is what it was for," he said with a grin. "Try it out."

Hermione hesitated only a moment before grabbing her purse from an inner pocket, lamenting how she didn't just leave the galleon pouch in it because of its size. She hadn't wanted to carry anything large or bulky and so only had what amounted to a large wallet. Still, she pulled out the black card and handed it over, watching the middle-aged witch's eyes widen to comical proportions.

"Is this acceptable?" Hermione asked, wondering at the woman's reaction.

"Y-yes! Of course it is! Er, will you be needing anything else, Miss?" The sales witch was ringing up the books and staring between Hermione and Harry with such fervor that the bushy-haired one moved a touch behind Harry to stay out of her gaze without trying to appear obvious.

"Thank you," Harry said, guiding Hermione out of the shop with a hand to the small of her back and staying between her and the sales witch. He was unsettled by the situation as well. "Well, that was weird," he said as the door closed behind them.

"Do you see what I see?" Hermione asked, pointing in front of the Three Broomsticks.

"Do you see a mangy black dog drinking from Neville's bottle of butterbeer?" Harry asked, highly amused.

"Yes."

"Then yes I do," Harry said, approaching the guzzling dog. "Hey mate. What's going on?"

"Not a lot," Neville said with a smile. "How are you two do-HEY!" Neville reached to grab his drink and found the dog with its head tilted back and the bottle emptying into its mouth before it dropped the empty bottle and burped.

"Haha! You got beat by a dog!" Ron laughed, coming up from where he had small roll pilfered from Dean's plate where the other boy had been finished.

Harry got down to look at the dog so the others couldn't hear. "Obey and you get fed. If you don't, I won't protect you from getting hexed."

The dog tilted its head to the side. "Come on, Neville. I'll get you a new butterbeer. You want something, Hermione? My treat."

"Harry, you don't have to keep buying things for me," Hermione said. Still, it was nice of him to do.

"No worries, Hermione. I've just got one thing I need to do before we go in," Harry finished with a large grin that the dog could swear he remembered from somewhere.

"What's that?"

In response, Harry conjured a large wooden bucket and then filled it with steamy, soapy water. Then three brushes were conjured, and the dog knew something was up.

"URF!" The black dog tried to take off like a dementor was behind it only for Harry's wand to snap out and the dog lifted from the air, growling petulantly with his ears laid back and his tail between his legs.

"Rub-a dub, dub, Black Doggy in a tub," Harry began to sing as the dog got a thorough scrubbing. However, the warming charm afterwards and the extremely large bowl of hot stew Madam Rosemerta was serving for the midday meal had definitely been worth it.

The dog stayed obediently to Harry's side, watching as the young man kept his arm around the brunette girl's waist almost the entire time in the village, impressed to find him flinging about a corporeal Patronus every few minutes to patrol the small town.

It hoped that some day soon, it would be able to ask if the memories provided to fuel the Patroni had been supplied with the assistance of the girl on Harry's arm.

After the meal for the dog and a very small amount to eat for Harry and Hermione, who planned to eat with Luna for lunch in only a few minutes and just wanted to have a snack first, Harry ordered a small keg of butterbeer that had runes to make the inside a bit more than a hundred times larger and filled to the brim and put that in his pouch. Apparently, it was a popular method of using runes because

it made shipping so much easier and allowed shops to keep more on hand.

"Alright dog," Harry said as he and Hermione made it to the edge of the village. "This lovely lady and myself are headed back to school where, unfortunately, you can't follow. Since we don't want to roam about with the floating bastards-"

"-Harry!"

"-to try and suck out our souls, we're going back a different way. Stay warm and, if you happen to know of any places where you can hide out and stay safe, do so. G'bye, fluffy."

Harry got a big lick in the face from the now shiny and no longer mangy black dog that made him spit to get rid of the taste of doggy slobber, causing Hermione to giggle. "Now that is funny," the bushy-haired one proclaimed.

"Yea, yea," Harry said, getting behind Hermione and wrapping his arms around his waist with his chin resting on her shoulder. "Be good dog." Then the two faded from view.

The dog's ears perked up as he saw the two leave, but he immediately set over to the area he had taken the other boy's drink from. Underneath of the bench, caught under some dirt, was a slip of paper that had been sticking out from the boy's trouser pocket.

A paper with the password list for the Gryffindor common room.

'It was great seeing you again, Harry. But I have to avenge James and Lily! Nothing else can get in the way of that! I'm proud of you for becoming the man you are, but now that I've finally had a chance to learn the password, I have to kill him.'

The black dog entered into a cave where he had been hiding out and transformed into Sirius Black to move several ratty clothes and blankets he had been able to steal from the garbage into a makeshift bed. The warming charm on his body and the hot food in his belly lulled him into sleep after he transformed back into his canine form for the added warmth of the fur.

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"Ohhh," Luna let out a pitiful moan. "My tummy is quite upset with me for eating so many desserts, I think."

"What do you expect?" Hermione asked, wondering what the magical equivalent of an antacid tablet was in the wizarding world. "You had two pieces of pumpkin pie with enough whipped cream to make a model of Harry's head."

Harry snorted. "Or it could have been that pudding-eating competition you challenged Ron to." The redhead in question chose that moment to fall backwards with a wheezing sound and hit the floor to let out a loud, pungent burp.

"Definitely the pudding," Luna agreed, letting out her own burp, followed by a contented sigh. "But it was also definitely worth it! He lost the bet, so he gets to walk about like a penguin and quack like a duck for an hour."

"You don't need to worry about him-" twin one began.

"-holding up his end of the deal," twin two finished.

Fred and George put Ron's arms over their shoulders with maniacal grins. "Come Devil Snape or exploding potion-"

"-or Ron's own nose nuggets-"

Hermione blanched.

"-Ron will uphold his honor!" The two finished, carrying their groaning brother out of the Great Hall to visit the loo. Better what was likely to come happen there than in the Great Hall where people were all eating.

"How in the world did you eat thirteen bowls of pudding?" Hermione asked, somewhat horrified by the number of empty bowls stacked next to the tiny waif of a girl. "Where did you put it? In your legs?"

"Tammy, my tummy," Luna responded, wondering how she could put it in her legs. "She isn't very pleased with me, though."

"You named your stomach?" Hermione asked, wondering why she was surprised.

"Of course! Don't you?" Luna asked. "It isn't fun to just talk to it without calling it something, isn't it?"

Hermione worked her mouth, trying to respond, but nothing came out. How do you respond to that? She was so shocked, words were leaving her mouth before she was even aware of it. "I named my bottom cheeks 'Velma' and 'Daphne' once." Hermione's eyes widened as she looked at the blank stares of her two friends. "I just said that out loud, didn't I?"

Blonde and black-haired heads bobbed in sync.

"Bugger."

"Er, anyway," Harry said slowly, looking around. "It looks like things are winding down. Want to head up for an early night?"

Hermione looked over and noticed Parvati and Lavender were still chatting with some of the older girls, so her and Luna could get to sleep without having to worry about waiting for the two girls to fall asleep first. It would be a wonderful respite compared to the nights they had been getting. Having Luna as a sort of permanent slumber party was kind of fun, since they could silence the drapes and talk about all sorts of things, but waking up in the morning and leaving without the girl being aware was a tricky process that usually required moving very slowly and fighting the girl's natural cuddly instinct. "Yes. Extra sleep would be nice."

Luna hiccuped and agreed, somewhat waddling as she walked opposite Hermione on the other side of Harry. "Oh! My tummy is all bulgy," she said as they left the Great Hall. "So much pudding..."

The threesome walked, albeit very slowly, to the Gryffindor common room, only to find a group of people standing in the way. 'This is not happening again,' Harry thought, wondering why Sirius was doing this. He had met Harry in dog form twice now and he had the entire time while they were in Hogsmeade to try and get Pettigrew!

"Step aside, please! Please move aside!" Dumbledore called out, the students parting like water around him. Luna found it somewhat

curious that they didn't step too close to Harry, Hermione or herself, either. "Please find out where she had gone, Mister Weasley."

Albus ran a gnarled finger over the shredded remains of the Fat Lady's portrait and evaluated the deep gashes in the wooden paneling behind the canvas frame. 'Odd. Not deep and rounded. Whatever was used was not sharp, but certainly had an edge.'

"She's over here, Professor!" Percy called out. The tide of students swelled closer to where Percy was pointing at another portrait where the head of the Fat Lady with her hair in disarray was the only thing visible.

"My dear lady, who did this to you?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"It was him! He got angry when I wouldn't open up for him! He had a list of passwords and got angry when I still wouldn't let him in!" The Fat Lady shrieked.

"Who," Dumbledore asked again.

"Sirius Black! Here! Dark as night he was and practically frothing at the mouth!"

The students began to talk and look around, half-expecting the deranged killer to come out of the shadows to get them. "Harry!" Hermione hissed, grabbing his upper arm as if wanting to make sure he couldn't be taken away or was still there. Luna did the same to his other with a much firmer grip and just a concerned look.

"Quiet!" Dumbledore bellowed, using a mild and wandless charm to enhance his voice to be heard over the rabble. "Everyone please go in and change into your sleeping clothes, then wait for a prefect to come and guide you to the Great Hall."

The elderly wizard waited for the children to enter the common room, mildly curious about Miss Lovegood's uncontested entrance, before casting a full sonorous to his throat. "Attention all students! Please dress in your sleeping garments and wait in your common rooms for a prefect to retrieve you. All students who are not in the medical wing will be required to sleep in the Great Hall tonight. An explanation will be given once all are accounted for. You have ten minutes."

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"Calm down, everyone!" Dumbledore ordered once his explanation was given. "Because Sirius Black was sighted in the castle, all students will be sleeping here in the Great Hall with faculty at each of the doors standing guard while we search the castle. You will be safe in this room."

Pop!

"Master Harry, sir?" Dobby asked, much to the shock of Dumbledore. Most house elves were neither seen nor heard, and they didn't pop up in the middle of a gathering of magicals!

'Where did the boy get a house elf?' Albus wondered. 'They're ridiculously difficult to obtain!' Something about its jittery movements seemed familiar, though. 'Is ... that the house elf that followed Lucius around? Why does it serve Harry?'

"Yes, Dobby? Is everything ready?" Harry asked, getting a nod so fast that the excitable creature's ears smacked the back and front of his head.

"Oh yes! We is having hot chocolate for everyone!"

Several faces, mostly younger, perked up at that. Free hot chocolate? Oh yes... There would be no sleep tonight! Gears in tiny heads were already turning, wondering what to do once the sugar rush kicked in and they were hyper.

"Good, then. Bring it out," Harry commanded, watching happily as Dobby popped away to do as he was told. It wasn't the power that Dobby did as he was told that pleased him, but the addition to each cup, which could have been used the first time around.

"Mister Potter?" McGonagall asked as she approached Harry and his friends.

"There are five drops each of a mild sleeping potion and calming draught in them," Harry explained before she had to ask. "Just being told Sirius Black was in the castle is stressful enough, but being

forced to sleep in a new place on the fly will probably make sleep actually take a while."

McGonagall blinked before nodding. "Five points to Gryffindor. Now get to bed."

Harry saluted. "Yes Ma'am!"

"Harry!" Hermione scolded, disturbed that Harry would make so light of the situation. 'Honestly! A killer just tried to break into the common room to get at him and he's acting like it's nothing!'

Luna simply giggled and saluted the Head of Gryffindor as well.

"Of all the bad influences in the school," Minerva grumbled as she walked away to tell Albus what she learned of the hot chocolate and Miss Lovegood's apparent corruption by Harry.

"Are you staying over on this side with us, Luna?" Harry asked as he got into a sleeping bag that Dumbledore had conjured for the students. Small cups of hot chocolate began appearing for all of the students who drank the sweet drink greedily. To the younger kids, it was chocolate, which was always a priority in their lives. To the older students, they knew the benefits of chocolate for a magic user, so they drank it as well. If nothing else, it was hot, and the stone floor was cold.

"Yes, thank you," Luna said, waving at the Thundercats who had taken up stations at the windows. Dumbledore had asked them what they had seen but, since they were under orders to help the dog-man and not tell anyone but Harry anything, they explained that they had seen nothing out of the ordinary other than his beard.

Luna got into the sleeping bag next to Harry while Hermione took the one on the other side of him. There was no way anyone was going to get her away from Harry's side when he was in danger. If Black wanted Harry, he'd have to make it through her, first. And she wasn't planning on making it easy for him!

Luna cuddled up to Harry's side with a yawn, knowing there was danger out there and knowing also that nowhere was safer for her than with him. She sighed contentedly as his arm wrapped around her by reflex, silently happy that people were falling asleep almost

as fast as they laid down. It seemed the overzealous house elves had added a little more than five drops to the various cups.

Hermione yawned and, after a month and a half of sleeping with a bed partner that loved to cuddle, she was cuddled up to and being held by Harry before she was even aware of it. The squeak when she realized it was music to Harry's ears.

And made Luna giggle.

"G'night you two," Harry said with a yawn.

"How are you so calm about all of this, Harry? There's a killer who almost made it into our common room!" Hermione asked quietly, not wanting to awaken anyone who would see Harry holding her. But she didn't want to be let go, either. He was warm and the stone floor was cold. And that was all this cuddling was about.

"What will worrying do?" Harry countered. "I've got my wand in a holster on my forearm and Black shouldn't have a wand. Even if he does, while we're in here, a teacher will raise a stink first."

"Is that what these stone things are on your arms?" Luna asked, tracing the runes on one of the bracers on his wrist. "They're just as warm as you are. It's quite strange."

"No. They're for something else," Harry said. "I'll tell you about it tomorrow. It takes too long and my hot chocolate is kicking in," he said with a yawn.

"Mnm-uh," Luna mumbled incoherently. She hadn't had any of the chocolate once she learned it was spiked, but she was tired. The Thundercats had taken her somewhere in the school that appeared to be a part of the very first build site and played various games with her. The three fell asleep with only Hermione murmuring about her knickers for a few seconds before the potion put her into a sleep deep enough to keep her abnormal habit from the teachers who were making rounds

On the other side of the room, Dumbledore was thinking of his inability to get Harry's emancipation overturned through any existing laws and his various plans to regain control over the young lord, including reconsidering the use of Miss Granger and Miss Lovegood

in an attempt to show his lack of maturity and how easily Harry could be influenced by his hormones.

"How did he get into the school?" Minerva asked the headmaster. "The wards should have alerted us to anyone who wasn't faculty or student!"

"I am unsure," Albus admitted. "I am normally alerted right away and have a constant awareness of their location. Sadly, that did not happen here."

"Was he not tagged at the gate?" She asked.

"It is impossible to tell. I have never heard of it being done, but it may be possible he learned how to bypass that security feature, but that then questions why he was unable to get past the portrait."

"Should we tell Harry about Black?"

"No. He has somehow learned that he is the most likely target and seems to be taking it oddly well. I think it best to hold that information back as long as possible. It can do him no good."

McGonagall was silent as she stared at the cuddling forms of Harry and his two lady friends. 'If they weren't such responsible children, I would be taking points for this,' she thought. 'But at the same time, it is rather cute.'

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] – Next Chapter! "Vengeful Wrath of the Valkyrie Spirit" or "Cause and Effect". Unsure which.

This isn't how it will actually happen, but is meant to show you something to expect.

Multi-voice from spirit: "You who have harmed the innocent will suffer a thousand pains of a thousand souls."

Person 1: "Please! Please let me go! I'll do anything you want!"

Multi-voice from spirit: "Then suffer!"

Person 1: Screams in unholy agony as their mind shatters.

"Daphne" and "Velma" was a tribute to "Nonjon" who wrote "Lovegood, Boobs Gooder" wherein Harry names the cheeks to Luna's bottom. A Harry/Luna crack/comedy fic. It mentions naughty acts, but doesn't go into any real detail, so anyone could read it, really. Hermione is barely mentioned in passing. A LOT of innuendo and crude humor (the whole thing.)



## Chapter12 – Vengeful Wrath of the Valkyrie Spirit

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Warnings: Adult Language, Graphic Violence, Mental Torture, Language, Partial Nudity, Adult Situations, Frightening Imagery

Challenge: Reptilia28

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parsletongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

Any mention of a duck in this chapter is a tip of the hat to Seel'vor. I recently reread his "Quantum Leap" story and every time I read about Sprout and a duck, I crack up.

I may dislike Snape, but the man is supposed to know his stuff. That is seen here.

Soul Mates finally gets explained! (Also, the explanation on my plot hole will be at the end of this chapter.) In this chapter is the final explanation of what Soul Mates means IN THIS STORY. I believe this to be the most accurate/realistic representation of the term, minus the magic, of course. To those telling me I am wrong for saying soul mates don't exist, I hope this clears up what I've been trying to say in this world/universe. This is NOT why Luna was added or changed because I am adding her. This was a view I've had due to the MASSIVE number of soul-bond stories I've read. I like the concept and wanted some kind of strong example of my change to the norm, but there is one thing I dislike that Lora will bring up in this one about what is generally accepted. Lora's explanation is basically my view for this concept. I will state the exact reason I added Luna and why it is important at the end of this chapter.

Fixed previous chapters in relation to added detail regarding the Forbidden Forest, Ministry oversight of Hogwarts and various scenes, spelling errors, typos and grammatical errors.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Notebooks and Letters" by chem prof (Harry/Hermione)

xXx Previously xXx

"How did he [Sirius Black] get into the school?" Minerva asked the headmaster. "The wards should have alerted us to anyone who wasn't faculty or student!"

"I am unsure," Albus admitted. "I am normally alerted right away and have a constant awareness of their location. Sadly, that did not happen here."

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xXx STORY xXx

"What do you mean she hasn't been going to her bed at night?" Mandy asked Cho the next evening. The search for Sirius Black was completed early that morning and everyone was finally allowed back into their common rooms without an adult minder taking them in groups, but Luna had apparently not returned at all that day. She had somehow changed her clothes without having to go there to do it, they suspected with magic. They had no way of knowing that Harry had three full sets of clothes stashed in his wardrobe for her, or that Luna enjoyed showing off her panties because she liked how his face turned red. The pretty Chinese girl had been growing increasingly aggravated throughout all of October and it seemed it was now coming to a head when she spent the majority of the day looking for the younger blonde Ravenclaw and been unable to find her.

"What I mean is that little bitch has been mocking us for the past month!" Cho growled out. She normally wasn't truly mean to people, but Luna was a sort of exclusion to the rule. She was weird and

abnormal and just as crazy as her father who ran that stupid newspaper filled with things that weren't factual; something that annoyed her to no end since Cho cared more about reality. Luna simply refused to see the truth behind things and kept going on about creatures that didn't exist despite all evidence proving her wrong and she refused to see reason. But now she was toying with them!

"How's she mocked us?" Marietta asked. "She doesn't talk to us or do anything that suggests that."

"She knows we've been trapping her bed! She hasn't been sleeping in it according to her dorm mates. Hasn't been for a bloody month! She's not even there right now. They thought we've been tormenting her the whole time and locked her out of the tower again or just that she'd rather sleep elsewhere because she's so weird. She's also been avoiding everything we've set up for her around the school. She's messing with us now!"

"That doesn't sound like Loony," Mandy said slowly.

"If it isn't, then that means one of two things," Cho seethed. "Either she is just extremely lucky, or we have been failing to plan properly and keep missing her because we're incapable of it. Are you saying she could possibly be that lucky to miss several dozen pranks or that we're incompetent?"

"N-no!" Mandy and Marietta said as one. "But she's been spending all of her time with Potter and Granger and those cats. They've been watching out for her and Potter always seems to know when they're walking into something. He may be the reason we haven't been able to get her."

"Those cats haven't been able to listen to us plan in the shower room, so there's no way they could be a part of it, and Potter's a moron and Granger would have to know more than is possible to stop us. But you're right, they are together most of the time, so that would normally be a problem. We just have to get her when he's not around," Cho complained.

"They're always together," Marietta said. "How do we get around that? I mean, the only time they aren't is for classes and if we try

anything then, we'll be late and if the faculty finds out something happened to her and that we're late, they'll put it all together."

"I'm beyond pranks. She avoided my trap on her bed and it caused me to fail my essay for the dementor's aura. I've never failed before! She needs needs to be taught a lesson she won't forget. Discomfort and isolation won't be enough this time. I want something that'll last so she won't ever forget!" Cho's hands shook in rage as she looked at her monthly essay that Professor Flitwick had refused to accept, somehow seeing Luna's successes at avoiding the traps as a direct snub and believing fully that she was too honorable to simply falsify a second occurrence for her work.

Most Ravenclaws took the tiny man's challenges to use his Apprenticeship Requirement program, forcing them to hold themselves, and their work, to a higher standard than other students to make their grades worth double and so he had the opportunity to spot out a Charms apprentice early and coach any who just simply had the talent, believing every child should be pushed to do their best. Hermione Granger was one of only three others in the entire school who weren't a Ravenclaw who did the same. But it was because Cho had been unable to verify her findings that her work was nothing more than a theory. Any other students falling prey to her spellwork would get her into trouble and knowing it was coming apparently caused inconsistent results when her two friends had eventually agreed to be her test subjects.

The Lestat Principle, which worked on the subconscious and fear-related sections of the brain, simply didn't work when a terrified mind was already working on thinking up all of the possible things they feared. After all, it was a concept that was put forth after the infamous vampire who had developed a mental power that did just that, ensnaring his victims and making them see him as the ultimate safety, giving themselves to him fully for that fear to end. So, when the girls approached and activated those spells, their over-active minds were too strong for Cho's amateur work on an elusive element.

"I'm going to use one of my father's spells," Cho growled out, crushing the unaccepted essay in balled up fists. "No one will be able to help her."

The Chang family had been incredibly respected in Shanghai when they lived there in both the magical and mundane worlds as being unparalleled acupuncturists without the use of needles, using their magic instead of metal, which was known to magicals to affect life energy in a negative way. Their mastery of the human energy systems and its manipulation had been near legendary until one of her ancestors used it to manipulate his clients like marionettes to gain political and economical power. The family had barely escaped, being forced to leave him behind to suffer for his crimes. But not without taking their family's legacy, filled with centuries of experience. That had been taken with them three generations ago. It was mostly kept under lock and key, but individual books had been left out carelessly when her father was doing some light study on the subject.

And Cho didn't become a Ravenclaw by pure happenstance.

Mandy and Marietta looked at each other as Cho made plans for an actual attack on Luna. This was past a line that they had always seen in what they did in the past. One they may have been willing to toe, but had never crossed. They had never done anything to Luna that could truly hurt her outside of general, and sometimes heavy, discomfort. What Cho was planning, however, could put the girl out of commission for more than a little while.

They had always been appeased with general discomfort and making her suffer in various ways that were, in the end, ultimately harmless. At least in a physical sense. Luna would get mildly sick, but nothing Pomfrey couldn't fix in a few hours or with a potion, or she would suffer from her fear of small places, which was something that actually amused them greatly since it was such a pointless fear in their eyes. In truth, they had never had reason to go farther than that because it always worked and she was always aware that she was below them and that her odd habits were unwelcome. But with Luna evading them so much recently, the girls, and mostly the leader of the small pack, felt it was a slight upon themselves and their honor. Someone who was abnormal and not like everyone else, that they saw as a lesser being than themselves, was avoiding their attacks and, even worse, not shoving it in their faces as if they weren't worth the time or effort!

Sadly, Mandy and Marietta were followers. They were unable to really see this was wrong and choose to not go along with it. The

girls were like parasites. They gained their sustenance and relied on the power of someone greater than themselves to survive, something Voldemort's lackies could relate to. Most kids were like that, where they naturally felt the social hierarchy and knew their places in it. It was rare for them to try and change it. Undesirable traits and favored traits, weighted for each person, generally put them in various areas of that social strata where they then had personality traits that allowed them to move up or down a little more. Wealth, appearance, strength, clothing, hygiene and conformity were all things that people could see and put them into their places in society.

Personality and charisma also played a very large part of that scheme. Voldemort, for example, presented a strong and powerful front that made people want to follow him, but he also had the power to back things he wanted or said up. Hitler, by contrast, had no true personal power, but was one charismatic son of a bitch and had been effective enough to force the majority of the world into a war to resist him. Even Harry Potter was an up and coming entity with those traits. He was sure of himself and confident and held great power, making many in the school want to follow him.

Something Hermione could attest to, complete with stuttering admittance and blush.

In comparison, Draco Malfoy had no power save for that of his father, but he had money, above-average looks and could comport himself with dignity and class when he had to. He was higher up in the food chain simply because he had an abundance of things people favored while having no personal strengths or power, magically and politically speaking, to speak of. Even his general intelligence was sub-par.

It was that same social hierarchy that put Luna Lovegood at the bottom of the entire system, making her an able target for others' acts of aggression without anyone saying or doing anything about it. She didn't fit the mold for what was "normal" and, while pretty, tended to act and dress so abnormally that her appearance wasn't generally factored. Especially when added with various edible jewelry like radish earrings she sometimes wore and her lack of retaliation when attacked. She also didn't present a powerful front or image, making her appear weak to those who took things at face value, which was easily the majority of the world, children especially.

She just took whatever abuse came her way without speaking up or fighting back, making her a safe and easy target for those who wanted to affirm their own positions in that social hierarchy.

Humans were animals. They may be far more advanced than others from an evolutionary standpoint, but they still shared numerous traits in common with animals. They turned on others when they sensed a weakness, they didn't feel bad about assaulting those that they believed to be of a lesser status than themselves and tended to follow the strongest amongst them. That was highly prevalent amongst children in a setting where their every action wasn't monitored by adults. They mocked and ridiculed others, sometimes hitting them; they bowed to the orders of those that they felt were stronger than themselves and when they found a weakness in someone, they would use that to attack, usually mentally where the pain was at its worst.

But by being evolved, humans usually had a conscience to let them know they were about to step over a line that those same social hierarchies held its members to. Or when they did, for those who were either outside of them or in a different one where it was allowed, such as criminal organizations which generally allowed many things that were against social norms in others. As followers, Mandy and Marietta, the ones who followed the stronger amongst them, they kept quiet, allowing themselves to be taken over that line and leaving it well behind them.

"We understand," Mandy and Marietta said, swallowing as Cho gave them a rough draft of her current plan.

And like animals, when one's place in the pecking order was threatened or challenged outright, it was only natural that action be taken to defend that position. As effectively as possible and in the strongest method to ensure that place of authority was ensured.

xXxXxXx

"Do you always smush fruit into your milk?" Hermione asked on that same Monday, finally wondering why the girl seemed to do that each day she didn't have fruit juice instead. While 'smushing' wasn't exactly a real word, the blonde was quite adamant that that was exactly what it was she was doing.

"Indeedy do," Luna said with a brighter-than-usual smile. It had been the first day she was being cuddled rather than doing the cuddling with Hermione and, while different, she had enjoyed the experience. And the warmth. Harry was warm and she always felt safe with him, but Hermione had been a different sort of warm and she was sure boys and girls cuddled differently. That was really the only thing she could think of to explain it. "I always try to get fruit in my drinks in the morning and like going from fruit to fruit. Except for apple juice," she said, crinkling her nose in disgust. "I enjoy warm apple cider on Christmas day, something of a tradition you understand, but apple juice always makes me think of someone tinkling."

Two seats down, Neville choked on his apple juice, not enjoying the experience of shooting it out of his nose. Suddenly, the smell he had always rather enjoyed wasn't quite as pleasant.

Hermione frowned, not totally sure how to respond. She was never fond of apples regardless of how she got them. "Er ... why?"

Luna looked meaningfully down the table to Ron, who was eating his fill and without an apple or apple juice near him. "Someone drank his sister's juice when he was much younger and realized it was all gone and he would get caught. He then came up with a plan and tried to get away with it. Seeing that experience's result has left me rather ... anti-apple."

"It never occurred to me before," Hermione said slowly, looking somewhat green. "I have never once seen Ron eating anything apple, even a pie."

"Arthur's doing," Luna said with a nod as she grabbed an apple from the fruit basket by them. "He was so furious with Ron taking Ginny's juice and then tricking her into drinking ... that, that he forced Ron into eating and drinking everything apple that they had. He wasn't allowed to eat or drink anything else for about a week other than two glasses of water to keep him hydrated each morning and afternoon."

"Don't they have a small apple orchard?" Hermione asked in dawning horror, watching Luna toss the apple up into the air and catch it, repeatedly.

"A small one, yes. But it had an interesting side-effect." To prove her point, she rolled the apple down the table and Hermione watched as



it neared Ron, who slowed his eating as he watched it from the corner of his eye and then stilled as the red orb came close. He made a disgusted face and, refusing to touch it with his hands, used a spoon to pick up the offending snack and flung it back down the table, making sure to make it plop into a bowl of scrambled eggs so it wouldn't roll back.

"What the hell, Weasley!" Dean exclaimed, wiping egg from his body where it had splattered. He tossed the apple back at Ron, who caught it and tossed it back down towards Hermione and Luna out of reflex, sending it away from him and away from the person who would throw it back.

Luna looked back to Hermione, noticing the brunette staring at her with a raised eyebrow. "Basically, he hates being around anything apple. I'm willing to eat them since I rather enjoy apple fritter, but he risks hurling any time he smells them."

"Interesting," Hermione pondered aloud. Ron's eating was almost at a normal rate now as he chewed his food more thoroughly and, curiously enough, with manners she hadn't seen before. 'Hum. He can be trained. I can honestly say I didn't see that one coming. I wonder how he'd react to apple-scented body lotions or candles,' she thought with a dark grin. Who ever said Hermione Granger couldn't pull a prank or five?

"Karoo!" Dozens of heads turned up to see a beautiful blue bird with a surprisingly large wing span fly in through the open windows of the Great Hall with a barrel roll and righting itself almost immediately in an elegant display of aerial acrobatics before circling twice in search of its target. Even those who were diligent in their Care of Magical Creatures work had no idea what the creature was. The tips of all of its wings were a strange silver and the beak and claws were the same, but appeared to be slightly yellow. Hagrid practically quivered in his iron-reinforced chair, wondering how to catch what he was sure was simply a misunderstood creature that needed a good mommy.

Nearly the entire Great Hall watched with wide and curious gazes as the bird flew above Luna and then dove with a flourish before it flung its wings out to stop immediately and seemed to simply hover with its wings outstretched and its clawed feet stretched out as if reaching for the quirky blonde who was a mere two feet away from it.

Many were shocked it didn't snatch her right up. The thing was as wide with its wings as the third-years were tall and its claws as large as Hagrid's hands. Hands which were snatching up napkins from other faculty members' places and trying to craft a quick net with surprising dexterity.

And only then did they notice a shrunken package attached to its right talon.

"What is that!" Hermione asked in shock as Luna untied her package.

"Daddy has been traveling to various countries since mid-September and he never forgets. It apparently traveled quite a distance," Luna explained calmly, offering the fruit bowl to the odd bird and allowing it to gobble its choices down, still somehow simply floating in the air. "Normally he'd be home by now and use a standard owl, but he said he was so happy I had friends here that he would remain out on safari for another month."

"I meant the bird," Hermione said calmly. Far too calmly, most thought as they listened in while trying to appear circumspect. Had there been even one other conversation going on, it may have succeeded.

"Oh. Well, we've called them 'Sparky Cassherns' and 'George' in the past when we discovered them, but I don't know if anyone has named them something else," Luna said, slowly blinking her large, round eyes at Hermione. "They're partial to flying about clouds and trying to ride along that silver lining that always seems to be around the pretty ones. They don't much like the gray, angry ones that hold rain and their feathers hold a strong static charge that they can discharge at will. Personally, I think they're the ones who enjoy making lightning, trying to make the dark clouds go away."

Hermione considered explaining meteorology to Luna, or the nugget of knowledge at the edge of her memory about something called a 'thunder bird', but decided against it as the giant avian launched outward with only a single beat of its huge wings, seemingly reaching full speed immediately. "You discovered those?"

"Yes," Luna admitted with a bob of her head as she unshrunk the package her father sent her. "It played tug-of-war with me, trying to

take my breakfast plate when I was eight, and when Daddy came out of the tent, he offered to set it a place at the table and it was fine. Not much for conversation, though. Mother was quite upset that a bird was sitting at the table, but curious as to how he could use the fork."

"The fork? Table?" Hermione asked weakly, wondering at why that was the first place Mister Lovegood would go to when he saw his daughter fighting over a plate with a rather large bird. 'How could he use a fork?' Hermione mused to herself.

"Yep. He was much smaller at the time, though, so he fit in the chair." Luna grinned brightly as the package was opened and revealed her present underneath. She pulled it out to reveal a simple packing material that held two dozen crystal figurines, each about four inches tall. The were each crafted to look like individual fairies with various styles of wings, either dragonfly, butterfly, bee or angelic, feather-like wings; various colors of hair, either cropped short and spiky or long and luxurious, dresses from stylized armored or jungle-like bikinis to long, flowing dresses and with various expressions that appeared to be near perfection on their faces. As though something were trying to be captured, but never quite made it there.

Each was delicate and beautifully crafted. And while the bodies and hair seemed to be made of a single crystal that shifted in color as needed to make them look almost natural, the clothes and accessories they held like bows or knives at their waists or on their calves, were all other forms of crystal that looked to have been grown around the body since they were attached without actually being the same crystal as the body.

"Whoa," Hermione mumbled, wide-eyed. "What ... are they?"

Luna picked up the letter from her father and read it aloud for Hermione's benefit, but also slightly elated to be the center of attention in a good way for once.

Dearest Luna,

I'm sorry this is most likely to come later than your actual birthday. I'm not in the country and it just takes a little longer, even with our friend's speedy flying. I've recently learned the muggles will see

them flying high above in the sky at night sometimes when they release their stored energy and call them shooting stars. Impressive, isn't it? A magical creature they can actually see even though it's surrounded by magic!

As for your birthday present, I got it in Ireland. The fairies here apparently dance with some of the witches in the many fairy circles on All Hallows Eve and the selected ones are gifted these figurines by capturing the starlight and growing the crystal, each fairy making a replica of itself. It was quite the beautiful spectacle. I've also enclosed the memory for your enjoyment. It's the standard Rites requirements, so be ready for that. I am unsure of how I got all of these, but they were placed inside of my room at the inn where I was staying when I returned.

They're in the various forms the fairies here, but I don't recall seeing any of the ones I noticed a part of this group. You can take and store emotions if you ask them to and will let you feel them any time you want just as if you were reliving the memory. They glow softly when an emotion is stored. I noticed a human version of myself as well and charged it with my love for you so you will always know how much you mean to me. It's in a separate package on the bottom. You'll also find one of yourself.

I miss you honey, but I'll see you at Christmas. I should also be home mid-November, so feel free to send as many letters after that as you wish. Just remember it'll take me a little while to get and respond to them until then.

I love you and enjoy your presents,

Daddy

"Your birthday was recent?" Hermione asked in confusion. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Halloween, yes. And I didn't want anyone to bother or stress about it. Plus, it isn't exactly a great day for Harry and I didn't want to intrude on any plans he had to honor or mourn his parents. He's very private, but he seemed reticent throughout much of the day, and with Hogsmeade and Sirius Black's intrusion into the castle, I didn't think it was a big deal."

"You should have told us," Hermione said. "We'd have celebrated with you."

"It's no bother," Luna said, feeling warm and fuzzy inside that Hermione cared. "You didn't know. But Daddy knew and didn't forget and sent me a wonderful gift, so everything worked out."

"What worked out?" Harry asked, grabbing a plate from the center of the table and filling it with a variety of food and ignoring the silent Great Hall outwardly. Inside, however, he knew whatever was going on was from the package of curious items Luna appeared to have received. With the surprises out of the way and nothing special appearing to happen, most of the students began going back to their meals.

"Luna's birthday was yesterday and she didn't tell us," Hermione explained, watching Luna blush lightly and look down in mild shame, feeling like she did something wrong. "You realize this means we'll need to come up with something for her, don't you?"

"Already looking for payback for your birthday tradition, are we?" Harry asked amusedly, his eyes shining brightly at Hermione's blush and squawk of surprise.

"You really needn't go through the trouble," Luna rushed to assure them. "Daddy sent me a gift and I didn't expect you to know, so you have no reason to worry about it."

Harry looked at Luna and smiled, noticing that she truly and honestly was worried about them going through the trouble of doing something for her. He couldn't be sure if it was that she didn't want to be the center of attention, like him and Hermione, or if she didn't want them to feel bad for missing it. Knowing her, it was probably both. "Then how about this, Luna. What would you have liked on your birthday that we can fulfill? What would make you happy? You're our friend and we want to share the anniversary of your journey into the world with you. That's what birthdays are for and why we want to."

"I just care about cake," Ron explained from down the table a bit. "That and presents."

Luna giggled and looked back at Harry and Hermione, wondering what she could tell them. "But you've already given me what I'd want. You're my friends."

"We'll always be your friends, Luna," Hermione explained with a smile. "But we still want to do something to celebrate. How about pizza? You enjoyed that. We could get that again if you'd like, or something else that you would prefer."

"Can we get one with those yellow fruits on it again?"

"Done," Harry said with a grin as the morning post came in through the windows. Harry took the letters addressed to him and placed them in an inner pocket to be read a little later since one was from Gringotts and he had no idea who would try to read over his shoulder and took his Daily Prophet and Quibbler to read. The stories in the latter were amusing, and it was worth the read to see Luna beam at him happily.

Though Hermione's sudden desire to read the publication was a little odd. He suspected it was due to the Snorkacks he had the Room of Requirement create for Luna that had pushed her into the realm of the Lovegoods.

"Oh!" Hermione exclaimed, finding a letter from her parents coming in with Hedwig who had happily done a letter run for her master's Hermione. That, and the girl gave bacon. Sweet, glorious bacon!

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Lord Potter:

You are summoned to the Wizengamot session scheduled for the bi-annual meeting on Friday, November 12th. Regardless of our duties and meetings as required for the sake of exacting law, we have two bi-annual meetings each year where all members are required to sit, rather than the portion that is required for our legal tasks. As you may or may not know, only a certain portion of the Wizengamot is required to attend for various legal functions based on the severity of the crime being judged, so you may be called at some time to attend one of these such meetings. Attendance to all bi-annual Wizengamot meetings is mandatory, however, and failure to appear will be seen as a criminal act and you will be charged with

dereliction of duty and once caught, will be required to atone through a one-year stay in Azkaban.

However, you may also appoint a proxy to sit in your stead. Supreme Mugwump Dumbledore has offered to do so if you require, stating he is most capable of talking with you when needed and knowing your educational needs more thoroughly than anyone else. Of course, you may appoint anyone you choose so long as they have wizarding relations in each generation for a minimum of five such generations from both sides unless you marry, at which point the Lady Potter shall be able to sit proxy for you at your behest, regardless of her status. I believe many others are willing to sit via proxy for you as well.

I hope this information assists you in your duties for our Ministry For Magic and as Lord Potter. I don't mean to be presumptuous, but felt ensuring you would be aware was worth any potential upset you may feel .

Alexander Bartholomew Morganne Pleesan

Wizengamot Court Scribe XXLVI-II

Harry scowled at the rather official-sounding letter, though it was apparently some random person attempting to help him, and looked at the others he had received. Whoever this 'Alexander' person was had certainly been helpful to Harry. The bespectacled boy had no idea that he would have to attend this meeting with a bunch of crotchety old men who, if memory served, and it did, a good many had been out for his blood in his recent, or future, experience. "Bloody vultures," he mumbled, wishing he could go down to pretend to be a normal kid and deal with these at some point closer to never. "Oh well. I sorta knew something like this was going to happen. I have only myself to ... no ... I can blame Lora, too. I blame her instead."

Lord Potter:

A Diagon shopkeeper approached Gringotts yesterday afternoon about the business proposition you had warned us about. John Coolidge, the trunk maker, gave us the design models for his Transportation Arches and all knowledge regarding their manufacture as per the instructions you had given us. Once we

knew how to create them and fully understood the theory, he requested his mind be wiped of the process and only remember he created them and sold them to you. We have not yet done so since that was not a part of the deal you discussed with us. He declared fearing someone would approach him to learn how to create the devices if he remembered how. Normally, we would simply accept payment and do so, but as he is the original mind behind their creation, we would rather wait and discuss it with you. We have ensured we can create the Transportation Arches to the same degree as Mr Coolidge. While our understanding of the design is full, he is technically under your employ, so the decision is ultimately yours.

Mr Coolidge was unable to craft any form of security for the Arches that met your requirements. He can lock any two devices to one another, including add new Arches to a previously-existing Arch, but he still requires physically being next to both. Mr Coolidge could not design a method by which users could be keyed into the devices to utilize the Arch system except during their creation, using methods he admits to using on his trunks. However, that method would also require altering each Arch to add each new user, which is unacceptable.

Gringotts is willing to design and craft a security system based on what Mr Coolidge stated were your intentions, which was not quite as detailed as what you had given to us. A system through the Archways with a similar function as the wizarding Floo travel system, but one in which you do not need to call the name of, along with allowing only select individuals to travel without adding each one to every Archway. We will do this for the opportunity to use them in our vault system within the bank. We cannot discuss their use by us for security reasons, but would like to offer that trade. If you refuse, you may come to negotiate a fee for the service. We felt applying similar security functions as the portal at King's Cross would be an appropriate location to start since it is similar in design, but a lost art amongst wizardkind.

Also enclosed are the enchanted parchments and a bottle of unique ink crafted out of onyx and crystal and pre-enchanted for use with a will. Simply add seven drops of blood with which to bind its functions to you. We strongly recommend writing your will by standard means first and foremost, and then allowing a trusted legal representative look it over for loopholes or easy points of contestation. While you



may always update your will by writing a replacement, should anything unfortunate happen before you can complete a proper will, there can be nothing done for it.

The orange parchment lists the proper directions for heading the document and crafting it to ensure you can update it without the two wills contesting one another. Any questions may be directed at myself.

Potter Accounts Manager

Griphook

Harry looked at the requirements for crafting his will and paled. He had hoped it could be something simple like saying 'I want this to go to this person and that to go to that person', but instead, formatting and the actual vernacular, which Hermione would later tell him meant 'words', he used had to be specific. Very specific. Anything he wrote that could even possibly be taken with different meanings was to be avoided at all costs and trying to suggest using a code word through a letter given after his death, even if it wasn't a part of the will itself, was also ill-advised since it left vague statements that others could latch onto and pick apart to try and get what they wanted.

"So much for simple," he grumbled, putting all of the paperwork into his trunk and locking it shut. Then he went to his Gringotts letter and composed a reply.

Accounts Manager Griphook,

Thank you for alerting me that John, the trunk maker, gave you the Arches. We had talked about them looking like regular doors at the time, but what they look like doesn't matter so much as long as muggles can have them in their homes and not get in trouble for displaying something blatantly magical to their visitors.

What I need from these portals, or Arches or whatever you want to call them, is a method by which I can key in certain people to the whole portal system of those particular portals, and make one and tie it into the main one I will have at Potter Manor in an emergency so I, and whoever is with me, can escape if needed without the enemy doing the same. My hope is to have one of these at my

friends' houses so they can escape to mine if something horrible happens based on what we discussed a few months ago. If needed, the first one can be the Master Arch or something, which would be at my home, and they could come to my home from their portal while going from mine to wherever.

I've been learning to tie crystals into various items during their creation. Would it be possible to have a master key or crystal so I can add people whenever I want and keep it with me, but it then ties them to the portal system? I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but merely hope to help give any possible ideas.

I will be happy to allow the Goblin Nation to utilize these once security has been applied. I do not wish to take these public yet, so you may use them. I plan only to use these with my friends and those I wish to keep safe for what is to come.

Lord Harry James Potter

Harry quickly offered the letter to Hedwig in order to allow the snowy white owl to take it to Griphook before grabbing his bag and heading out to Ancient Runes with Hermione. He already had an idea of what he was going to do for his end-of-term assignment for the class in thanks to the bushy-haired girl and she hadn't even been trying. 'I really do need to get that girl some cookies.'

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Two days later on Wednesday, Dumbledore was alone in his office with his chair pulled from behind his desk and over to the window. He sat, silent and still as he watched the flying shapes in the early-morning light darting about as they practiced for the upcoming Quidditch game that Saturday. It was a little difficult to see due to the weather getting progressively worse since the previous Saturday, however, so he was unsure of who was who. He had the large phonograph in the background, playing an old rendition of Greensleeves that was even older than he was that had once belonged to his sister, Arianna, may she rest in peace. The slow, melodic harmonies seemed to fit his mood at the moment.

He saw one shape, vaguely red from this distance, suddenly shoot downwards to the ground and pull out just barely in time to avoid

crashing and then dart back into the air, pointing out which of those flying about was the source of his current thoughts: Harry Potter.

Throughout the past two months, Harry had shown a backbone and stubborn streak that quite simply had the aging headmaster baffled. Baffled and more than just a little frustrated. The boy knew more than he should and had managed to subvert Albus' control by claiming his inheritance, something Albus had tried to keep from happening. The old man had even gone so far as to ensure no teacher there would even buy books that spoke of Harry's family in hopes he wouldn't get ideas. Miss Granger had those books from before her first year had started, sure, but it hadn't taken much to ensure she never considered loaning them to Harry and giving him ideas. Why else would an information-starved boy who learned books about his family existed not go for them? Miss Granger had told him more about his family from what she had read than anyone else up to that point.

He was sitting here and staring outside the window into the dreary landscape at faceless blobs because he was well and truly worried. Harry refused to listen and heed his advice and even left the Dursleys' home open to attack. The boy just didn't do as he was told and without Albus Dumbledore's guidance, wouldn't be able to meet his destiny.

And what was worse, he was showing signs that had Albus' neck hairs standing at attention. No, it was Harry's blatant similarities to Tom Marvolo Riddle. Harry had most of the school behind him with these Defense Association club meetings and had, only one month ago, created what was frighteningly similar to Voldemort's Inner Circle. The boy even had Slytherins in it!

Harry was teaching those 'Inner Circle' members more than he was teaching the other students and was even paying them to do it. That was truly frightening because they were children. Their choices and their stances on nearly anything could be changed. Few truly cared about blood purity at that age and most of those who spouted such things off were doing as they were trained. But money spoke to everyone, children just as thoroughly as adults. Harry had even gotten them out onto the Quidditch Pitch or the main courtyard early each morning to work out and do various exercises to get their bodies up and into shape for enhanced dodging ability! No child

liked to work out, and while they didn't always put full effort into it, they still followed. It was like Harry was preparing them for a war.

But for what side?

As far as Dumbledore was able to tell, Harry simply up and changed after his battle with Voldemort's soul fragment in the Chamber of Secrets at the end of the previous year. Miss Granger had even said as much to Minerva, which had been dutifully explained to him when the woman explained why Harry suddenly seemed to lack trust in nearly everyone. She had told him that she thought it was Harry maturing much faster and suddenly due to his near brush with death, but Albus wasn't so sure. It was equally possible that the soul fragment had chosen to take Harry's body instead of that of Miss Weasley. The girl hadn't seen what had actually happened, after all.

But as much as the evidence of observation supported that theory, it also failed to. Mister Potter was greatly more affectionate now. He was almost always in the company of Miss Granger and more recently Miss Lovegood. Tom Riddle had never been one for emotional attachments. He simply didn't care for anyone but himself. Harry went out of his way to help others, even now. But, could it be possible that Voldemort's soul fragment was trying to hide it had taken Harry over and was overacting what he believed the part was to be? Or could Harry actually be showing much more affection for some reason?

Harry Potter was an enigma.

'I think my talks with Severus will now have to advance to more than simple discussions,' the old man thought to himself, silently wondering when the music had stopped and become nothing more than gentle static as the turntable rotated. He sighed and reactivated the music with a simple lift of his finger. 'There are risks involved, but they pale in comparison to what Harry is becoming.'

Albus checked his fob watch, finding it to be only a quarter past six. 'Miss Granger is the eldest of her peers and closest to Harry. She would make the most obvious choice for an heir. I can not allow anything to happen to Harry while the Malfoys still have the greatest chance to obtain everything from him as his closest family. I had hoped Miss Weasley would be available in a few years, but I fear I haven't that kind of time. Still, while I would have preferred her, Miss

Granger also owes Harry a life debt. It should keep the scales balanced between what she owes him and what I must force to happen between them.'

The old man looked out the window and sighed, wondering at how young the children truly were he was planning on using for the 'Greater Good'. 'Still, there is a chance I am misreading the signs of Harry going dark. Everyone deserves a second chance. I have no choice but to read his thoughts and determine if a more direct approach will be needed first. Then I can be assured of my actions.'

"I must admit," Dumbledore began talking to himself out loud, desiring someone to speak to and being unable to approach anyone else with his thoughts, not wanting to burden them with his troubles and needing to hear a voice. "I had never considered a calming or sleeping draught within hot chocolate for the students. That is a very kind and generous thing to do."

Under the headmaster's desk, one of the Thundercats that had been assigned to spy for most days because of his slightly chubbier midsection slowly conked his forehead against the leg of the desk. 'This old man is going to ramble on again! Lionel help me!' None of the Thundercats were quite sure where the name had come from, but it was almost as prominent in their minds as their master, Harry's. They could only assume it was the name of some advanced being who gifted them with his name. Claws was already working on trying to replicate a rather curious sword they were all aware of, as well.

"There is still some light in young Harry," Dumbledore assured himself, feeling as though he needed to and catching the attention of Snarf who stopped hitting his head against the desk. "Perhaps not all is lost quite yet. He can still be brought back to the Light."

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Wed, Nov 5

Michael Greengrass

Dear Daughter,

I apologize for taking so long to get to you, but the information you requested was not easy to obtain, particularly during this time in the

Ministry when there is so much frustration over finding out who the heirs of the four founders of Hogwarts are. It required a hefty donation to a clerk, but I gathered the information you requested. You should find it enclosed.

Your actions and theories are sound and appreciated. Regardless of what happens, you should be more aware of events transpiring in Hogwarts and with Mr Potter while you are a member of this group he has created. You are correct in that anything that could hurt either the family or our standing should be brought to my attention as soon as possible. Otherwise, do as you suggested and do nothing to cause him to distrust you and learn from him. I do not know where this may lead, but I have raised you to be intelligent and cunning; a true Slytherin if ever there was one. I am proud of you and will stand by your actions. Just keep your wits about you and do not let this go to your head.

Also, please keep an eye on your sister. I know Astoria is a part of our family, and generally protected, but things are new to her and she has always been more shy than yourself. I know you probably wish little to do with her, but perhaps you could try to allow her to join some of your activities? Just do not ignore her. She's looked up to you for far too long to let her be crushed like that.

May you prosper, my dear daughter,

Father

Daphne smiled as she finished reading the letter her father sent to her, decoding it in her head as she went. Few pureblood men truly cared for their daughters unless they didn't have a son to carry on their name, otherwise, their daughters were nothing more than livestock to be bartered for political or financial gain. Michael Greengrass, thankfully, was not one of those purebloods. He did not marry for love, but it still found him and his wife after marriage, and he loved his daughters.

Case in point, her younger sister, Astoria. She had just become a first-year student and, while not exactly treated badly, she certainly wasn't made welcome in Slytherin simply because she was easy to push around. But Daphne had always loved her younger sister and looked out for her whenever able. It was sweet of her father to show

he cared, but ultimately not needed. But he did make a good point. Perhaps she could have her take a more active role in Potter's club?

Daphne slipped out the scrolls her father had obtained for her and looked them over, smirking triumphantly as she rolled them back up. She was, as her father said, highly intelligent. She knew when to speak up and bite back at the foolish males in her House who thought they could intimidate and dominate her, which effectively kept her safer than otherwise likely. Some girls were touched inappropriately or tricked into giving more than was respectable when snogging in a broom closet due to empty promises.

She wasn't such a mindless bint.

Whatever was happening with Potter was a good thing. She doubted an alliance of any sort would be advisable at this point in time. Potter wasn't trained in any form of pureblood etiquette or how to be a proper Head of House, but if he made it through the first year or two, or was willing to accept some coaching, he could be a powerful ally.

Her father's first letter after learning of Potter's acceptance of her and Blaise had explained things that she had long suspected, but never truly heard; the Dark Lord Voldemort's followers believed him to still be alive. There were whispers of safeguards and Malfoy had been far too suspect the previous year to discount the idea. The Greengrasses had nearly been forced into picking a side in the previous war, but had ultimately been able to remain neutral up to Voldemort's downfall. But it wasn't a sure thing if he was truly able to come back.

And her father feared it was more than a strong possibility. Malfoy Senior had already attempted to garner the Head Greengrass' allegiance for His return.

That scared the whole family.

Regardless, Potter had shown her something of himself that night he brought up a smaller group to study with to assist him and she felt being at his side was the safest place to be right now, and held the best hope for the future. The boy had fame, raw magical power, fortune and political clout that trumped nearly everyone. And if she was right, there wasn't some coincidence for all of those seats becoming active at once.

Hopefully, her father's hard work and flowing gold would help them come to a mutually beneficial agreement.

Daphne heard a knock at her door as she was putting her new scrolls away in a security chest hidden in her wall. She quickly closed everything inside and grabbed a book while sitting on her bed, not wanting anyone to know where her security chest was since they weren't exactly allowed within school since she hid it in the wall.

"Come in," she called out after barely a second from the knock, holding her wand at the side of her head as she pretended to be fluffing it out.

A girl in Slytherin could never be too careful, after all.

"I was hoping you would be here," Blaise Zabini said simply as he entered the room and closed the door, arching an eyebrow as she pulled her hand down and revealed her hidden wand. "Could you?" He asked, gesturing to the door.

"Runes," she said simply. "Automatically silences everything once the door's closed." There were also a good many nasty surprises if she activated the security runes as well, but even though she and Blaise were good friends, they could never always be fully trusted when you knew about magical forms of persuasion.

Blaise nodded, taking a seat at the girl's personal desk. Much like Ravenclaws third year and up, each Slytherin from each year had their own room. It came about from the fact that their common room and living areas were once parts of the dungeon and each room a cell that had been modified for comfortable sleeping and living. Everyone just tried to ignore why so many cells were once needed and what may have happened in them in the past.

"I received a letter from my father. He was able to get the items I had requested of him and suggests strongly allying myself with Harry without being formal about it."

"Hmph," Daphne hummed with a smirk. "Interesting timing. I got a letter from mine saying he found the information I'd asked of him. Looks like things are running smoothly enough."



"Too smoothly in this line of work," Blaise said simply, folding his hands in his lap. "I am also unsure if the majority of the other Slytherins are willing to listen to our reasoning for much longer. While they accepted that we had the best opportunity to spy on Potter and his friends, they have begun asking what we have been learning."

"They aren't the brightest lumos from the wand, are they?" Daphne growled out, her silky black hair getting flipped over her shoulder. It was a matter of habit that had started as a rude dismissal of boys seeking her attentions whilst talking to her chest, which was currently comparable to Susan Bones'. They both tended to get glares from some sixth-year girls because of it. But Daphne also did it whenever she was frustrated or angry.

"No," Blaise agreed deadpan. "They expect us to start spouting off secrets after only a month when we haven't had time to cultivate any form of rapport with him and we are still at vicious odds with Weasley."

Daphne harrumphed, showing her thoughts on that. "The bastard isn't much better than Malfoy," she stated with a curled lip. She rather disliked both boys tremendously.

"Don't stoop," Blaise reminded her of her language. "You don't wish to dumb down to their level."

Daphne rolled her eyes with a small grin. "I like to fight my enemies fairly."

"Liar," Blaise rebuked with a slowly-growing grin. "Better unfair and win than fair and lose."

"True," Daphne chirped before turning serious. "When do we go to him with what we've got? And how do we want to handle the idiots wanting info?"

Blaise closed his eyes and allowed his eyes to dart left and right rapidly as he reviewed mental notes using his occlumency training. Daphne allowed him a few moments to think, seeing what he came up with while having her own ideas. "In order, I believe we should wait until Weasley either gives us an opportunity alone with Potter or an opportunity shows itself where the information is helpful. The

same, I believe, holds true with what I collected. Weasley's a rat, but he's a rat with coercion ability with Potter."

The brown-haired boy sighed, thinking of the low collective mind of the majority of their House. "As for the others, I believe we either start giving them small things that are known or see what Harry thinks we should do about it. I find it hard to accept that they feel anything we learn would go to them instead of our families. No student here could use the information a fraction as well."

"It's 'Potter', Blaise," Daphne interrupted. "We can't let a slip like that happen outside."

Blaise bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Yes. Regardless of what he tells us to call him, the others simply wouldn't understand, would they?"

"Not if it means seeing us as the enemy," Daphne agreed. "But I don't think we should tell anyone anything. We can ask Potter and see what he would rather us do. He did all but say he expected us to use that as a cover, which I thought was a pretty Slytherin thing to do."

"Have we got a Potter Crush, Miss Greengrass?" Blaise asked in a teasing tone, watching the girl's lightly tanned skin darken in a blush.

"He's powerful and would make a suitable husband, that's all," she sniped, admitting to nothing. "And don't think I haven't seen you looking at him."

Blaise blushed, but also admitted to nothing. "My job is to know as much as possible about him, that's all."

"Uh huh," Daphne grunted. "Next, you'll be telling me he'd make a suitable wife."

"Must we keep having this argument?" Blaise whined, finally cracking his apathetic demeanor, causing Daphne to chuckle.

"Aw, you know it's fun."

"For you," he grumbled. "I really am not gay." Daphne merely quirked an eyebrow at him. "Really! Fine, I'll snog you right now, will that prove it to you?"

Daphne allowed a single breathy snort to silently pass her lips as she rose up, watching Blaise's eyes widen a fraction of an inch. "I won't snog any man until he proves himself to me, Blaise, but sure, let's see. Touch my chest and tell me how they affect you." To push the issue a little, she leaned down, letting him have the opportunity to do so. She had seen where Blaise looked at Harry, and those were not heterosexual looks, and she highly doubted they were followed by heterosexual thoughts. Also, the boy currently looked scared to death, making this somewhat amusing.

Then she squawked as she actually felt his right hand caress her left mound, causing her to leap backwards with eyes wider than Blaise's. "You! You actually did it!"

"What did you expect?" Blaise asked, blinking rapidly. "I like girls and you told me to."

"But! I've seen the way you look at Harry!" Daphne exclaimed, her voice a bit higher than she normally allowed for.

"I'm impressed by his power, not that he's a male," Blaise said. "Impressed, not attracted. I have no thoughts or intentions of shagging him."

"Then that makes one of us," Daphne said with a snort. Potter would be a good ally to have, regardless of how that alliance came about. Blaise choked in the back of his throat, causing Daphne to smirk evilly. "Now get out of here, you perv. We'll see what Potter has to say the next time we see him and have the opportunity."

"Perv? I'm not the one who told the me to grope her," Blaise said, getting one quick jab in before rushing from her room before she could hex him.

'If he tells a soul, I'll Imperius a duck to savage him in his sleep...' she thought viciously, hiding her expansive bosom with an arm as the door slammed from the boy's quick departure. Sometimes, developing early wasn't quite all it was cracked up to be. Susan told her much the same thing.

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Friday morning was dark, dreary and wet with the accumulation of heavy clouds that varied from depressing gray to ominous black, occasionally lighting from behind with random discharges of lightning that had Luna searching for some big blue bird that Hermione tried to tell Harry really existed. It was the sort of day that made happy people simply want to cocoon themselves in thick blankets and suffer through the hours with a mug of hot chocolate and in comfortable silence with peace and simple tranquility as the weather vented its frustrations upon the world.

Into that atmosphere, the combined classes of Gryffindor and Slytherin jumped as the door to the Defense classroom crashed open and Severus Snape stalked in, his robe billowing behind him and his face a dark scowl. "Wands away and books out!" He barked, dropping his own manuals heavily on the desk with a bang. "Turn to page two thirty-three and get out parchment and quill."

"Sir, where's Professor Lupin?" Hermione asked, raising her hand as she did so.

"He has taken ill and that will be five points from Gryffindor," Snape seethed quietly. Sadly, he wasn't getting paid to take over another's class, but still required doing the work and it didn't make him happy, even if it was where he would rather be. "Now, if you're through asking questions that have nothing to do with today's class and being insufferable, perhaps we could get started with class, hm? Have you anything else?"

"One last thing since you asked," Hermione said, staring defiantly at the hated potions master. This wasn't his domain and she felt oddly ... empowered because of that. She'd have to figure out how Harry influenced this side of her later. "The syllabus doesn't have us starting werewolves until the end of term."

Snape snarled silently, fuming at the girl's audacity as he mentally raged. 'The Potter spawn is responsible for this, I know it! No matter ... Albus is allowing me a boon that I believe I shall gladly take.' Externally, the man towered over Hermione. "I have been selected to teach this class during Lupin's absence and you will learn what I will teach you! Now, since you seem incapable of

closing your mouth, perhaps you can put it to better use and tell me something about werewolves," he said, snapping her book shut so she couldn't read it.

Harry glared as he shook in his seat. 'Quick like lightning,' Harry thought simply, thinking of the Marauder name he had given himself and what he would do to the hated professor soon. 'He will not get away with this.' Unknown to Harry, he unconsciously removed one percent from the block of his power blocks and began to release a miasma-like wave of magic that simply floated in the room, charging it and making several students suddenly wary without an obvious cause, only those who felt of Harry as a true friend not suddenly on edge. It only empowered Hermione more, causing her to glare at Snape.

"A werewolf, unlike an animagus, is forced to change one night each month during the full moon instead of at will. No one is sure of exactly why it causes them to change, but they lose all sense of self and turn feral, not being able to distinguish friend from enemy and attacking anyone who comes close. They also spread their affliction through saliva and blood, but only when transformed. Also, their claws leave magical wounds that are difficult to treat magically, making their surviving victims that much worse off when being treated."

"Five points from Gryffindor for rambling," Snape said as he walked to a projector and turned to look at the outraged girl. "I did not require a full explanation, Miss Granger. Perhaps next time, you will give only short, concise answers." Snape slowly turned his eyes to Harry, wondering at the boy's lack of defense for one of his best friends as he activated the projector machine and began sifting through his slides. 'Ah. It looks like the little bastard is angry with me. Let the rage flow through you ... It will make looking through your mind so much easier, Potter. Perhaps a detention tonight would teach you your place, or maybe even missing the big game tomorrow. All I need is a good reason, you little brat. Speak up!'

It was a simple fact that anger clouded the mind and made it weaker, just as did pain-relieving potions, alcohol and many recreational drugs. That was one reason he was such an ass during classes. He was better able to read the minds of his students and he enjoyed tormenting them.

Hermione's eyes darted from the professor's back to Lupin's desk repeatedly as she thought through what they were being taught. 'I don't recall seeing Professor Lupin the first weekend of October, either and he seemed very worn out on the train ... I wonder...'

"I expect a three-foot essay on what you're about to learn on Tuesday with your next class," Snape warned, going through his slides as he began to lecture and warning various students, primarily those close to Harry and Harry himself, to keep quiet when their writing was apparently too loud or for imagined conversations until he finally got what he wanted. "Weasley! Stop talking and pay attention!"

"What! I wasn't sayin' nothin' you slimy ...!" The whole room was as silent as death as a dark and sinister smirk showed itself on Snape's pale face, made all the more intimidating from the light from the projector casting shadows over his eye sockets and making his yellow teeth seem to glow. Ron's eyes widened as the blood rushed from his face and a pained whimper escaped as he realized he wasn't thinking his response.

"Detention, Weasley," Snape hissed pleasantly, almost sounding happy. "Tonight and tomorrow. I've got some cauldrons and old chamber pots that I ordered that haven't been cleaned in decades and could use a good scrubbing."

Ron made a strange gagging sound as the light reflected off of his suddenly-paler face. 'Decades of not being cleaned? Chamber pots? Or dear Merlin no! Please don't let Snape use them first!' The idea of something so horrible already had his eyes watering.

'Not Potter, but his anger is reaching optimal levels. A couple more minutes of lecture to let it steep and then I shall do as Albus requested,' Snape thought, doing his best to explain werewolves as horrible and dangerous creatures that were to be feared and looked down upon rather than a person with an affliction that only affected them truly for one night of a month.

About ten minutes later, Snape finished his presentation and spun quickly, ensuring the students would look at him with wide eyes from the surprise of the sudden movement and then looked into Potter's eyes, glowing green from the light of the projector, and pushed his consciousness forward.

"What the bloody hell?" Snape asked out loud as he suddenly found himself in what looked like the Forbidden Forest. He stood and gave a grudging respect for what he saw, although he'd never say as much. "So, Potter. You've been developing occlumency. I'd be worried if you actually knew what you were- SHIT!"

Snape barely dodged to the side as a large pincer that was as large as he was around crashed to the ground where he had just been standing, alerted only by the shadow. He looked up in time to see an extraordinarily large acromantula look down to see if it had squashed him flat. 'Merlin's balls!' Snape roared mentally, wondering what the hell was going on. He attempted to leap upwards, trying to control his position by enforcing his own Will over that of the creator of the mindscape, but found himself only jumping about a foot into the air. His Will wasn't strong enough.

"Bombardia!" Snape yelled, flinging his wand outwards, letting his mental attack assault the mental defenses Harry had built and watching in satisfaction as the spider's head exploded, causing the giant creature to crash to the ground. "Not good ... enough...?" He looked around as he heard clicking and chattering of what he knew were a good many more such creatures.

He spun around and saw what appeared to be the astronomy tower of Hogwarts through the foliage and sprinted forward, moving far faster than he could in real life since he was working with his mind. 'The little bastard has an actual mindscape!' he yelled in his head. 'How is that even possible!'

ROAR!

Snape looked up to see several immense dragons flying through the air, beginning to circle around him as a few more joined their numbers. 'That can't be good...'

Indeed, moments later, they began to launch fiery balls of napalm into the forest around him, causing the caustic substance to splatter ineffectually against shields he raised as he began to run through the attacks, only to allow his eyes to widen as he saw a small contingent of centaurs keeping pace with him and notching arrows. "Potter! I'm going to kill you for this! Explosion!"

Snape stopped suddenly and let his mental attack hit the area around him with an eruption of fire from his mental avatar as its core, reducing the creatures close by to ash, but leaving him wide open to the dragons and wyvern within the air who chose that moment to launch a coordinated strike against him.

"Haste!" Snape yelled, dashing forward with even greater speed, leaving a crater in the ground from where he had stilled for his previous attack and being over two hundred yards away by the time the quick strikes actually hit the ground where he had been.

What Harry was unfamiliar with was how a true Legilimancer attacked the mind. He defended himself from Voldemort's attacks and had always had an unconscious battle with the soul fragment that had been in his forehead, but he had never actually fought one on equal grounds. When Voldemort attacked, he used an opening that already existed to get through before Harry realized it and then fought Harry's magic core directly and tried to force his soul fragment to take Harry over.

When Snape attacked his mind in fifth year to teach him how to defend his mind, he never actually told Harry he was supposed to fight the assault, only telling him to prepare himself and defend against it, thus letting Snape run rampant within his head, seeing whatever he wanted to see. Or rather, whatever Harry didn't want him to see that made it all the more interesting.

What was happening now, however, was Harry both defending and attacking the interloper while Snape was forced to defend himself. But it wasn't as though he was a body without defenses or assaults of his own. This was a mental world, no matter what it looked like. Everything here was a force of Will, one versus the other. Mindscapes were usually frowned upon because they took such focus and attention to detail that few could actually maintain them and not let the world crumble under its own weight. But every single aspect and detail of every single thing had to be planned and put into place to make the world function properly, many such things being done subconsciously, which also made them only a little more than an illusion. Like a wall. Knowing it wouldn't let a person just walk through it helped, but without telling it directly not to let anyone pass, it would be like walking through a paper screen.



So, Snape had as his weapons of choice anything he could possibly think of. Spells, items like swords or arrows, anything he understood the mechanics of and could envision properly, which left out things such as nuclear weapons, guns or even other creatures other than humans, since we instinctively knew ourselves.

The difference between what Snape knew, and what Harry knew, which was confusing the potions master greatly since he couldn't figure it out, was that Harry didn't limit himself to doing what he knew. He allowed his imagination to fuel a good bit of what was in this world. But that was also why those defenses weren't quite as effective as they could be.

So, Snape had the ability to attack and, since Harry had defenses that obviously knew he was here, there was no hiding the actuality of what he did, so he chose to lead a direct assault and go where he felt the prize memories would be: Hogwarts.

Which would also keep the large number of acromantula, dragons and whatever else that caused trees to crash loudly to the ground behind him from catching him. Assuming he moved fast enough. Since his native language was English, anything that resembled a spell had more impact to his own mind and held more power to be spoken in his own tongue, making spells in Latin pointless in this environment.

"Greater Haste!" Snape yelled, fueling more of his own mental power into his probe to move more quickly, gaining a greater lead from the creatures chasing him down, only to break through the tree line and stop in fear as he saw gargoyles launch themselves from the walls of Hogwarts' outer perimeter and goblins take aim with spears, bows and arrows and ballistae, what looked like a carriage-sized crossbows, every fifty feet with a spear-like arrow that was as big around as his head.

Not to mention another acromantula that was as large as the Slytherin common room.

Dozens of arrows were let loose as the gargoyles made it about half way down, causing Snape to be unsure of which was causing the high-pitched whistling sound, but knowing it didn't really matter.

As gargoyles and arrows got within only a few feet from hitting, Snape let out a war cry and shoved his hands forward, forcing his yell to somehow get quieter as it changed into actual waves that knocked all attacking entities away from him as effectively as if he were knocking down a house of cards and causing yet another crater to form around him as the shockwaves left in all directions.

'Merlin that took a lot out of me,' Snape thought, panting. 'Synchronizing his assaults like that makes the effect compound. I have to get in or I won't be able to do much more of this. There's just far too much to defend against at once. If it weren't for that, this would be like taking candy from a Gryffindor!'

Snape stood tall and looked around quickly as the goblins notched more arrows and the gargoyles' broken bodies began to rumble and pull themselves together. 'Where did that bloody spider go?'

Suddenly very wary, Snape looked around and couldn't see any sign of the large creature. There were no pieces of it laying about which meant his attack did nothing to it and something that large would certainly have been obvious when it moved.

Looking around and trying to listen for the giant arachnid, he suddenly realized the only sound he could hear was the wind before the goblins let their arrows fly, causing the high-pitched whine once again. "Haste!"

Snape realized in that moment the flaw of a coordinated strike as the goblins were doing. They all hit the same location without fail, each goblin being a perfect shot. But that meant he only needed to move in time in order to avoid them. He smirked. 'Not quite as good as you thought, Potter!'

Snape was just about to capitalize on his newfound knowledge when the huge acromantula made itself known.

Starting as a shadow on the ground.

Snape looked up and yelped as he pulled his mental probe back, pulling out of Harry's mindscape just before the spider that had leapt into the air crashed into the ground where he had been standing and in the areas around that for about eighty yards in each direction.

Snape's head jerked back and he spun away from Harry so the students wouldn't see the shock on his face as he tried to hide the fact anything that happened by once again telling them the assignment that would be due during their next class.

Harry, too, was in shock. He knew the whole incident took only a fraction of a second, but he knew exactly what had happened in his mind during a span of time that seemed to be almost ten minutes. He had never before suspected defending his mind against a Legilimencer would be like that. Snape had been plowing through his defenses with veritable ease until he had been surprised at the end.

He would have to rethink his strategy and possibly try to get added defenses. He would also have to see about trying to do something similar with Hermione if she was going to learn about his secrets.

Harry didn't know his abilities as a Legilimencer were almost as good as Snape's, not knowing he had naturally crafted his skill, but he knew he had been able to get through Hermione's defenses, quite literally, and that Snape would, too. If she were to be safe from the greasy-haired bastard, she'd have to be able to be safe from Harry, too.

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"Alright everyone, calm down!" Harry yelled out that same night. Snape had been scarce since his attempt to break into the Gryffindor's mind, which Harry was rather thankful for, and Harry had taken some aggression out in the Room of Requirement after Draco had decided to be a pain in the butt and send him an animated drawing of what he hoped would happen to Harry the next day.

"I know we usually do these things on Saturdays, but with the Quidditch match tomorrow, I'm sure you all would rather celebrate after the match rather than do this, so today's the day. We're starting something new." Harry smirked in his best evil impression, trying to project Mad-Eye Moody. "Duelling!"

There was a collective gasp from the students.

"We've been building up to this, working on shield spells and some various non-lethal ones, like stunners and body binds. I also tried to give you hints for dodging practice. Anyone who doesn't want to duel, I would like you to keep practicing making shields without incantations or wand movements with a partner sending tickling hexes or stunners. I've already put heavy cushioning charms on the floor."

"Do you even know how to duel, Potter?" Draco asked from the back, wondering what he could possibly be taught from someone who only knew about magic for two years and was raised by muggles.

Harry's smirk truly sent shivers down the spines of some of the younger students as it changed to something darker and more proud. "Professors Flitwick, Lupin and McGonagall," Harry said, looking to a blank patch of wall in the corner, "would the three of you like to come forward and have a friendly duel with me to show what I'll be teaching?"

As if color were being added to them from the top down, those three teachers, along with Madam Sprout, Pomfrey and Professor Vector faded into existence as their disillusionment charms were ended. "How did you know we were here?" Flitwick asked, stepping forward with the other two Harry had requested.

"That'd be telling, Professor," Harry said with a smirk, knowing Hermione would just be waiting for him to explain later.

"Mister Potter, I don't believe this is a good idea," Minerva began, not wanting to simply say no to him since Flitwick had given him quite a bit of authority and it actually was a good idea for what was needed. But to needlessly outnumber yourself three-to-one?

Harry, who had been training against multiple opponents, and had been fighting them before coming back in time, simply chose to smile winningly. "Then you'll kick my butt and put me in my place, simple as that. But they want to know what I'll be teaching them, and going up against a dueling champion and two others who fought in the last war and should still have some skill is a good way to show them."

The adults were obviously uncomfortable with that train of conversation, regardless of how the students were looking at them

with a bit of awe and respect, perhaps a bit of fear when looking at McGonagall, and merely nodded, taking positions across from the platform Harry had constructed while the students pushed back against the far wall.

"Treat this as a real duel," Harry warned the adults. "Underestimating me is only going to end badly. Anything goes except for things Pomfrey will get upset about."

"-I'm already upset!"

"Or are obviously things we shouldn't use," Harry finished as if he weren't interrupted while turning to the students. "Professor McGonagall is a transfigurations mistress. Keep that in mind when you see how she fights. Professor Flitwick is a dueling champion. Watch to see if he uses spell chains, or groups of spells fired off right after the others and see how they work together. Professor Lupin is a mystery and the wild card here. As far as we know, he has no specific specialty and there's no telling what kind of skills he's hiding away in that kind persona."

Harry ignored the quirked eyebrows of the adults or the looks they were giving each other as he continued. "Watch to see if they work together or try to take me out on their own. Look for openings you would try to capitalize on and think about what they do. Also, watch to see if I focus on one or two, or even all of them or what I do to make the numbers manageable. One-on-one is simple, but bad guys don't usually come in just ones."

Harry suddenly turned serious and his tone commanded attention. "Most of all, pay attention to what happens when you don't take them out of a fight permanently! For the first bit, I'm just going to be taking one out and not taking them out of the fight! Watch what happens!"

Harry turned to the adults and looked at them seriously. "Do you understand what they're learning with that?" He got three surprised nods in return. "Good. Don't hold back – I'm not."

"Mister Potter," McGonagall began, wanting to tell him they couldn't possible actually try to hurt him as he was a student, but she was cut off as Harry flung his wand forward and a simple stunner erupted from it with a loud crack, making the three adults scatter. It was

obviously meant as a warning since it moved towards them too slowly to be a threat.

"Incarcerous!" Remus yelled, sending magical ropes towards Harry before the green-eyed boy sidestepped them easily, having to duck beneath Flitwick's stunner.

Harry hopped sideways and sent out an arc of light that the trio of adults blocked with shields before deciding he was right. They would have to take him seriously.

McGonagall flicked her wand, causing the robe Harry was wearing to wrap around him, growing arms complete with hands and grabbing at him, holding him in place. "I believe that is quite enough, Mister Potter."

As the three adults stood and let down their guards, Harry smirked. "This is what you should never do in a battle, no matter how sure you are of victory!" He said loudly, confusing everyone present. "They see me bound, but they never took my wand or put me out of commission! I'm not down and I'm not out!"

With a yell, Harry cast a finite at his robes, forcing them to revert back to their original form even as he ducked sideways to avoid Flitwick's suddenly rapid spellfire as the tiny man sent half a dozen spells at the boy rapidly, causing Harry to rest on his right leg with his left at a straight angle and swing his wand over him in a circle, causing all the spells to bounce off of a shield that reflected them back to the ceiling.

"Stupefy, incarceration, percussio, stupefy!" Remus yelled out as McGonagall attempted to conjure several blocks of wood, the easiest to transfigure with the least amount of concentration needed, and send them towards Harry, turning into tiny parts of a cage as they surrounded him.

Harry transfigured the ground beneath McGonagall into maple syrup in a hole deep enough to make her sink to her waist as she lost her footing, breaking the woman's concentration and making the wood around him stop changing only half complete and then animating the near-cage to crawl towards Lupin and try to catch him as he turned his attention mostly onto Flitwick who was grinning widely.

"Impressive, Mister Potter! You could make a fine du- Whoa!" The tiny professor dodged just in time to avoid a stunner, which was followed by one to McGonagall that put her out of the commission.

The students then saw Remus bring her back, showing what Harry meant when he said out of the fight for good. He had almost had one down, but McGonagall was brought back just as quickly, taking away that edge.

Harry grinned and saluted the adults who regrouped next to one another before they found him suddenly fading from existence, even as the rest of the students roared approval as Harry disillusioned himself.

"Impressive, Mister Potter," Flitwick said, hoping to get Harry to speak and reveal his location. "You didn't even have to tap your head as most casters must."

"Thank you," Harry's voice echoed throughout the hall, using the same spells he had used with Bolt's first appearance.

Flitwick frowned, displeased that Harry had thought ahead. 'I had hoped to do this the easy way. Well, that and impress my Ravens...' Filius held his wand aloft in both hands above his head and a blinding light erupted forth, causing tiny motes of light to appear throughout the entire room no more than inches apart and glowing dimly to only his eyes.

Except for one spot that was void of light in a vaguely humanoid shape.

Flitwick charged forward with a battle cry, shocking the students as a new side of the near-always cheerful charm's professor was revealed. One that leapt, jabbed and fought fiercely with empty air before a blast of light from his wand ended Harry's invisibility.

More than just a little surprised, Harry shot a concussive blast of air between the two of them, causing Flitwick to be thrown away from him. The surprisingly agile old man righted himself in the air and landed on his feet, sliding back the last five feet to stand proudly in front of his two teammates.

"Perhaps this is enough now, Mister Potter," Filius stated, more a command than a request. He wasn't showing it, but he was a little winded from that sudden assault.

Harry nodded, putting his wand away. "Not quite as much as I was hoping you would all see, but enough to get the point across. Dueling is important if for no other reason than to know not to underestimate your opponent. They did, otherwise they'd have had me when Professor McGonagall snagged me in the beginning. Had we gone on much longer, they'd have probably stopped and kicked my butt."

The adults walked from the stage as straight as their bones would allow as Harry continued. While he was using Sirius as something of a scapegoat in this, he knew he needed more dueling partners and was hoping to find some decent ones with this meeting. "With Sirius Black getting into the school, I'm sure you can all see the benefit of being able to at least not just cower in fear if he shows up. While they don't know if he's got a wand or not, with this many in the school, it would be simple enough to get one from anyone."

Harry allowed that to percolate for a few moments before he continued once again, getting to the heart of this meeting. "You all saw me stun Professor McGonagall when she was surprised-

"And you had better hope this syrup comes out," she threatened from the sidelines where she was slowly vanishing what she could see.

"But with multiple opponents, they can be brought back at any time if you don't keep them out. Also, when they thought I was out, they let their guards down and began to talk to me. You may have the urge to gloat to your enemies. Don't. It's as simple as that. Trading insults back and forth during a fight is stupid. It means you're being sidetracked and you aren't focused. If they aren't out, you shouldn't stop. If you've stunned them, summon or break their wand and then they can't fight as easily, if at all. If they're murderers, then you can expect that they'll not shed a tear about killing you. So don't give them the chance." Harry looked around at each of the pale faces of the students around him, several thoroughly disturbed at what their minds were envisioning. Harry's voice had begun to get more impassioned as he spoke, remembering Sirius fighting Bellatrix and gloating as he practically pranced about before she blasted him into



the Veil of Death. All because he wanted to toy with her rather than put her down. It was simply the difference between life and death.

"Mister Potter, these are children," Madam Sprout huffed. "They are not fighting in a war and they do not need to hear that they should be killing their enemies."

"I never said they should," Harry countered. "Only that they should make sure a person is really out of the fight and not just down until revived. Think of it this way," he said, looking into the eyes of various students. "Hogwarts is supposed to be one of the safest places in Britain, but Sirius Black was able to get in and out without being seen except when he wanted to be, by the portrait. We could assume he was able to do this on his own, or we could wonder ... 'could he have had help?' If this place is so safe, then he shouldn't have been able to get in and out without being noticed, so it's only logical to assume that someone helped him get in and out. Therefore, we have to assume that someone could be helping him in general and may help in fighting later if it came down to it. It certainly would if someone found him in the hall, don't you think?"

The hall was deathly silent as the reality Harry had just painted struck everyone. Even the faculty was beginning to wonder, despite Albus' assurances otherwise.

The students began to pair off to practice dueling and taking tiny steps to try and get better as students began to wonder who was helping Sirius Black enter the school, now thoroughly convinced that he had to have had help.

Towards the end of the session, Susan Bones approached Neville, getting into his personal space and dragging him off to the side to 'talk' while taking a break. Both were a little sweaty and breathing heavily from the constant moving since Harry would randomly hit people with mild piercing charms to feel like bug bites if they stood still. Something about 'situational awareness' and conjuring shields instinctively.

Personally, Susan thought he liked to watch girls bounce in surprise. She got two such shots to her bottom. Hannah wound up with four. The youngest Bones would later learn Harry only did that with those who were working with him and getting paid. Harry somewhat felt it was his right to ensure they learned to anticipate random attacks.

Well, duty too. There was probably some of that in there, somewhere.

"Harry seems awfully driven to teach us, don't you think?" Susan asked without preamble as they grabbed cups of water from the table the house elves had provided. They apparently added some sort of fruit juice or something to make it sweeter during these events, because students drank it to the point where they swished as they left the room.

"I suppose," Neville said quietly, unsure of why the Hufflepuff was talking to him. Susan and her strange friend always seemed to be looking at him in the mornings when Harry made them work out whenever Harry and him were the last ones running. He wasn't the most observant, but he certainly noticed their giggles. "But, he's right, isn't he? Black could have found anyone in the hall, some firstie or something, and would have had a wand and a hostage."

"True," Susan admitted. "But, dueling? I could understand the patronus, but this is a little advanced. I mean, it almost looked like he let Professor McGonagall hit him with that thing with his robes."

"I doubt that," Neville said with a frown as he thought. "But I guess it's possible."

"He had us join that group of his before this stuff with Black," Susan said with a large gulp of water. "So what about that?"

"Is there some reason you're wanting to ask all of these questions?" Neville asked as he looked at the pretty, redheaded Hufflepuff. "I mean, I'm pretty sure he'd answer if you asked."

"I'm curious, is all," Susan admitted. "This all seems strange. I guess I'm just wondering what it's all about."

"He told us he wanted help with the Defense Club."

"Hm," Susan mumbled to herself. "I guess I'll ask him later." Susan looked over to the shy Gryffindor and sensed weakness in him. The kind of weakness one may see in a puppy. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Neville watched Susan leave in confusion. "What just happened?"

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"Pardon, but did you say a fully developed mindscape?" Dumbledore asked Severus. "That's quite impossible. Last year, he had moderate resistance, but it was easy to bypass. Even a skilled Occlumens is unable to build a full mindscape from nothing in so short a time. Especially not one that is effective."

"I am well aware, Headmaster," Snape said smoothly, not pleased to have his intelligence doubted. "But I did not say it was effective. Curiously, he was able to hold me to laws of gravity, but the only reason it was able to stop me was because I was surprised to find myself not immediately sifting through thoughts or memories."

"What did you encounter?" Albus asked.

"I arrived somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, though not in any place I've actually seen in reality. Upon my arrival, I had to deal with acromantula the size of small houses to large ones, dragons, wyvern, centaur, goblins, gargoyles and a squirrel that died almost as soon as I noticed it when I launched my first heavy attack."

"A squirrel?" Dumbledore asked. 'Not quite the mark of a megalomaniac...'

"The tactics used by his avatars were pedestrian at best," Snape sneered. "I was just about to bypass his walls and into the Hogwarts representation when one of his acromantula surprised me. I had to withdraw my probe or risk having it turned on me."

"Were the avatars projections of himself or drones?" Dumbledore asked, curious.

"There was too much intelligence to be drones," Snape said after a moment and tasting bile in his mouth at the admission. Drones were just what they sounded like. They did what was assigned to them and were unable to think for themselves, nor could they adapt. But they were also pawns and expendable. True avatars, such as those that could adapt and think were parts of the occlumens' mind in which they could attack the intruder's probe and reverse it, thus entering what would normally be a highly-defended mind. "Not

enough to suggest intelligence, but enough to see they adapted. The boy doesn't have the intelligence to spare."

Albus allowed the dig at Harry to pass as though he hadn't heard it and thought hard about what he was being told. It didn't matter how experienced one was, they just simply could not create a whole mindscape in only a few months' time. The larger and more complex the mindscape, the worse it would be until perfected. But therein lay the problem. They were never completed! They required daily upkeep and the amount of that upkeep depended directly on how large the mindscape was, almost making it a worthless skill unless one had an incredible mind to begin with.

Not something one could say about Harry Potter.

Hermione Granger, perhaps, had a mind that could do such a thing. Dumbledore would be hard pressed to recall anyone who had that kind of mental acuity. Even Harry's mother paled in comparison, not that anyone ever said as much.

"How complete would you say it was?" Albus eventually asked.

Severus actually paused to consider for a real answer. "It was large and details were excellent. I was bound by gravity, but was still able to speed up my avatar suggesting he thought to ensure they stayed on the ground, but hadn't considered augmentation."

'Rookie mistakes,' Dumbledore thought. 'Something learned through experience.'

"I would say he's worked more on making it appear aesthetically pleasing than functional, but at the same time, I find myself unsure."

"How do you mean?" Albus asked curiously.

"Consider if you will crafting a model toy," Severus began. "One who knows next to nothing would fail to grasp several key concepts like the internal workings, but could make it appear to look relatively complete on the outside. It is much like that. It's like he has all the parts and put them where they belong, but hasn't actually pieced them together."

"A house of sticks and twigs rather than bricks," Dumbledore said with a nod, thinking back to an old fable from his youth.

"An awkward example, but essentially correct," Severus said, looking moderately uncomfortable.

"This is most disturbing, Severus. He is growing far beyond normal rates, even if starting with the correct knowledge and, in effect, reconstituting himself, it is simply too fast. His magical power is immense. His occlumency, simple, but far beyond his years, much less possible ability. I am at a loss to understand how," Dumbledore explained, wondering at his deductive ability. Even if Harry were somehow being controlled or even assisted by the soul fragment from the Chamber of Secrets or the one he felt was in the boy's scar, this was simply too fast, wasn't it?

"The brat did come into his inheritance and family estate," Several seethed. "Is it not possible the Potters had something that could help with such things?"

"A remote one, but yes. It is entirely possible," the older man agreed.

"If you're really that curious, I do have veritaserum in my stores and-

"Severus! Please!" Albus scolded the Potion's professor. "I will not have this discussion again."

"Very well," Snape said in oily tones, fully believing the old man would come to him with that suggestion eventually. "Will that be all, Headmaster?"

"For now, yes. Thank you, Severus." Dumbledore sighed as the door closed behind the younger man, feeling adrift and confused. "Harry, my boy. I wish you were easier to read and understand."

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"I can't believe they'd actually make you go out and play in this!" Hermione exclaimed, voicing her displeasure at the idea of Harry going out and flying about on a broomstick in the middle of a heavy storm with an abundance of lightning. The boy wore metal glasses! How was this not asking for trouble?

This Saturday had been worse than all the previous days. The rain was coming down heavily and providing almost no visibility. It was extremely cold out and there were places on the grounds where ice had formed in patches for no obvious reason. It most certainly was not the kind of weather to go out and play a stupid game in! 'Harry could catch hypothermia or pneumonia or something!'

Hermione continued to grumble under her breath as she charmed Harry's glasses to be immune to the rain and not fog from the heat from his face. He was quite sure he heard words spoken towards the faculty that would invariably get the girl a detention. He was actually somewhat ashamed that he hadn't thought to learn the charms his brunette friend was doing for him right now. He had thought to use wandless magic to do it, but hadn't been able to get it right. As the team called for a time out, right about the time Angelina's broom had been struck by lightning, Hermione had popped up while he was trying for the third time and took care of it, along with warming and drying charms in abundance.

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said as he leaned down and kissed the surprised girl on the forehead before taking off into the air with the rest of the team, leaving his blushing friend to head back to the stands where Luna was waiting for her. Ron, unfortunately, was in Snape's dungeon, learning that Snape had, in fact, used the chamber pots before allowing him to clean them. As a matter of fact, he had two for each of his Slytherins that had been used.

At that moment in time, Ron was crying into the goop he was cleaning.

"Did it help?" Luna asked, casting a bubble around the twosome and spreading it a little to cover their friends to act like a shield to keep some of the rain off of them.

"I ... er, ... think he was happy with the help, yes," Hermione stuttered. Luna simply smiled and cuddled into her friend, trying to share body warmth. Even with the warming charms, it wasn't exactly comfortable outside.

Despite the horrible weather, Harry was smiling as he rose into the air. He knew he should be focusing on the game, but this was the first time he had an excuse to kiss Hermione and was legitimately

able to leave right afterwards, and he hadn't even thought about it before hand! It had just kind of happened and she hadn't slapped or hexed him! And with the rain so bad, no one had even noticed but the two of them!

Hermione and Luna had both taken to his new affectionate side with an almost eager mentality. Well, to be honest, Luna was basically this snuggly thing from the very beginning and had taken to it without knowing differently. Hermione, however, knew he was never that affectionate, and that he usually shied away from such contact, but she took to cuddling whenever they sat to one another, usually by leaning into his side. It was almost necessary to be comfortable with Luna almost constantly sharing their laps. Now that he was willing to do more than cuddle by sitting against one another, Hermione had been perfectly willing to go with more hugs than they had before.

Harry was dislodged from his thoughts as a bolt of lightning hit the goals near Oliver Wood. 'Right! Head in the game, Potter!' Harry knew what was coming soon with the dementors and had been sure of his ability to handle it. He could cast a corporeal patronus even when one of the dark buggers was right in front of him, proven by the events preceding his fifth year in the previous time line. So, it was simply a waiting game.

While he was flying and looking for the Snitch, Harry was mentally wondering why Slytherin could possibly get away with stating they couldn't play this match, thus making it against Hufflepuff. Just because they said they had to train their newest seeker, Draco bloody Malfoy. Harry had been new not only to the game, but to flying during his first year, and he had made it onto the game and played his first game. It was obviously just something to keep them from playing in the bad weather, but at the same time, Hufflepuff hadn't known until just a few days before that they were going to have to play Gryffindor and hadn't had nearly as much training time because of that.

Harry began his usual scouting patterns as he sought out the Snitch, lost in his thoughts and the only flashes of light coming from lightning instead of the golden ball. 'How could Snape possibly get away with that? Didn't McGonagall or Sprout try to stop it at all?'

A burst of lightning reflected of a glint of gold a few dozen feet in front of Harry, making him dart forward and up, trying to catch the fast ball. 'You won't get away from me this time!' Harry thought, pushing his Nimbus 2000 to its limits as Cedric Diggory, the opposing seeker trailed behind once he saw Harry mark the Snitch.

The Snitch darted into dark clouds, making Harry lose it as he drifted, looking for even a speck of gold to hint at where it had gone and unaware it did just as before, shooting lower and leaving him up in the air alone. Mostly.

"Where is that damn thing!" He raged as Hermione's charms to keep him dry failed and his body was soaked in the water from the low-hanging clouds.

Suddenly, the gray cloud in front of Harry parted as a dementor flew forward and closed its face in on Harry's, followed by several others. Harry hadn't realized what he had been doing and drifted further up than he had the previous time through this event. And the dementors hadn't been sent away from his patronus several times throughout the year as they were this time around in the past, either. Therefore, when they sensed Harry nearby, they swarmed since he wasn't defending himself or the game.

All Harry could think of as he pulled out his wand was thoughts of anger and resentment when he could think at all. Each time one of the dementors came forward and sucked at his life force, his thoughts fled him and he was left trying to remember not only a happy memory, but how to defeat them in the first place.

And then one of the dementors came in closer than the others and tried to finish the job his brethren weren't, wanting the meal himself.

Harry instinctively moved away and fell from his broom, feeling himself fall and holding a strange calm within himself. 'Flying's never felt this free before... No pressure at all... So free...'

"You stupid little bastard!"

Harry thought he heard something and had just enough time to wonder at what was interrupting the freeing sensation he was feeling when he felt himself move without doing it himself. Not for the first



time, Harry could feel another presence within himself, taking control over his body.

Dumbledore looked up as the crowd gasped, seeing Harry tumbling from the sky with his broom out of sight. His eyes widened as he saw no less than thirty dementors trailing the sky above him, trying to catch him before he hit the ground. He was up on his feet as quickly as the rest of the crowd and had his wand in his fingers, trying to decide if Harry deserved another chance or if the signs of him turning dark were to be heeded when he failed to do so before. Then he realized the Prophecy would save the boy. Harry couldn't truly die except by being murdered by Voldemort.

He put his wand away, ready to find validation in many of the choices of his past. It was either that, or Harry Potter would die here, meaning he had been wrong all those years ago. A gamble, but something that had to be done for the Greater Good. He had to know that Harry was the child of prophesy.

At about five hundred feet from the ground, Harry's body righted itself and stopped in the air, hovering there with his arms outstretched and his eyes glowing green. The limiter seal on his bracers was removed to release ninety-nine percent of his magical core as someone else took control.

As the dementors above him got closer, a thick ball of pale blue light enveloped Harry's body and then shot upwards, blasting through the dementors and into the sky as the dark creatures howled in pain as the power overwhelmed them. Through the clouds, the crowd could see arms coming off of the pillar of light and circling like a whirlpool, beginning to make the clouds spin with it.

Then the pillar pulsed, sending out light in circles that washed over everyone and every thing, just as his patronus had done when he first showed the school, making them all feel safe and sending the dementors rushing from the school with horrific wails and falling to the ground, in too much pain to keep themselves afloat and barely making it past Hogsmeade and into the forest before they were overcome.

Slowly, Harry's soggy robes steamed and changed from black cotton to an unknown material of white that was so pure, it almost glowed of its own accord. Silver runes at all of the hems actually did

glow as an armor found itself called forward once again, feeling purpose and duty sing to it.

The arms circling in the sky began to move more quickly before the pillar in the air suddenly exploded outwards, forcing the clouds to rush off into the distance and causing the sunlight to shine down upon the school and surrounding lands for the first time in almost two full weeks.

When the students looked back at Harry, he was once again in his black robes and was on his side, looking to be asleep even though he was still hovering five hundred feet in the air until Fred and George Weasley grabbed him and took him down, finding that he would remain at whatever place they put him like he was on an adjustable shelf.

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"Simply a case of magical exhaustion," Pomfrey told the gathered students. "He'll be out for the night with that dreamless sleep potion, but he's fine."

"That's fine?" Fred asked, pointing at the sleeping wizard who was hovering three feet over the bed where Luna was poking her arm to make sure he wasn't resting on something. For some reason, he wouldn't lower more than three feet over whatever surface he was placed on to.

"I said he's fine," Pomfrey grumbled, "not that I could explain that."

"Accidental magic, perhaps?" Hermione asked, her eyes red and puffy from where she had feared the worst. "I mean, he was several hundred feet in the air and he was unconscious after getting rid of the dementors."

"He's got more magic in him now than I've ever registered in him before, but the tests all show he's exhausted to the point of extremes," Poppy said simply. "I'm telling you that the tests show he's exhausted. Not what is happening with him now."

Pomfrey looked at the rather large number of students in her hospital and frowned. They were all muddy and this was supposed to be a sanitary place. Not to mention all the noise that could still

disrupt the boy's sleep, regardless of whatever potions he was on. "Alright you lot. He'll be up in time for breakfast. I gave him a dreamless sleeping draught to ensure he'll recover as much of his magic as possible through the night. I want you out of here and off to bed with you. Maybe a cup of hot cocoa first. You all look to have pneumonia soon if you don't get out of those wet clothes and I don't need more patients!"

"Ah, can we...?" Hermione began, gesturing towards herself and Luna.

"For a bit," Poppy agreed. These girls were close to Mister Potter and were rather quiet. It would be better for their own health to be here and deal with the problem than away and fret, wracking their nerves. "But I want you to be aware of curfew, understand?"

Hermione nodded until Madam Pomfrey turned for her office and then looked back to Harry where Luna was already trying to push him down and tuck him in. "He won't go any lower, Luna."

Luna growled and glared at the bed as if it were the one to blame. "He would if his magic wasn't still coming out of him," the blonde grumbled.

Hermione sighed and sat against the headboard to hold onto Harry until Luna had the bright idea to put two beds together with just enough space to put Harry in between them so he floated above the floor and the girls could rest at a similar height to him. "What if he stops floating?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Just until we have to leave," Luna explained. "Then we should probably transfigure some walls on the bed so he doesn't float about. I had a bed like that, once, so I suspect this is something children do every now and then."

'Don't say a word, not a word! Not a single one!' Hermione thought to herself. 'But do get Colin in here with his camera...'

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"You realize you're in for it, don't you?" Meghan stated unnecessarily. She was walking with Lora towards the boss' area as a form of support for her best friend and lover, feeling bad that

events happened as they had. Lora was doing her best in a situation that was just about as bad as it was possible to get in their line of work, and doing a damn good job of it, but her mortal was just a pain in the ass. 'Not that I can really blame him. He's a damn man. The worlds would be better off if they were all turned into women.'

"You think I don't know that?" Lora hissed. "That stupid idiot was overconfident and wasn't paying attention and I had to save his ass! There wasn't any other choice! That old bastard wasn't going to save him this time!"

"I know, Honey. But it isn't me you have to convince." The two stopped at a pair of massive doors where Meghan hugged Lora tightly. "Whatever happens, I believe in you. Good luck."

Lora smiled weakly at the slightly older girl and then took a steadying breath. 'I can do this! What I did was the right thing to do and necessary! I was technically under orders!'

The blue-haired woman placed her palm on the door and was transported before The One. 'I'm in such deep shit,' she thought to herself.

"I heard that," a deep, rumbling voice responded, causing Lora to flinch.

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"Now's the perfect time to do it!" Cho hissed as she led the other two girls through the halls. "Potter's out of commission and Granger went to the library ahead of her."

"But what if anyone sees us?" Marietta asked.

"The library is too heavy to be purely on one floor other than ground level," Cho explained as they rushed to catch up with Luna, who had left the Ravenclaw common room after getting some sort of homework she had hidden somewhere. "Even with magic, there are far too many books to support. We'll get her on the fifth floor since that's nothing but classrooms and store rooms." At least, nothing other than a closed off entrance into the library that they suspected Luna of using sometimes. Madam Pince had closed off all multi-floor

entrances other than the third floor by her desk, but there were times when they believed the odd girl had figured out one of the doors.

Darting from shadow to shadow, one of the Thundercats following the three girls narrowed his fuzzy brow and used their quick speeding ability to rush ahead and find Hermione in the library. He wasn't sure where his master's Luna was, but knew Hermione would be in the spot she had marked some time ago. However, since the ability was not one created by running, but a form of traveling from place to place by skipping the area in between, he couldn't just rush ahead to find Luna since he didn't know where he would be heading towards. Humans would call the ability teleportation or apparition, but it wasn't instant and actually required travel. So, they preferred to call it 'slinking'.

"I can hear her footsteps," Mandy whispered, not wanting to be overheard. She wasn't feeling very sure of their current course of action, but it was too late to back out now. For better or worse, she had chosen to follow Cho the day she accepted the challenge to flash an upper-year boy and there would be no backing out, now.

"Hey Lovegood!" Cho called out after turning a corner and seeing the blonde girl nearing the end of the hall.

Luna, never really one to be needlessly rude, turned and blinked curiously at the three girls approaching her with quick steps and repressed a frown. These girls were never very nice to her. And they didn't appear to be in any mood to do so now. Something about them seemed different today than they usually seemed when approaching her. "Yes?"

"You must think you're pretty smart, avoiding us for the past month, huh?" Cho asked nastily, feeling her anger spike as she was finally able to confront the source of her aggressions. "You think that just because you're friends with Potter, you're better than others now? That you're better than us?"

Luna stayed silent, unsure of what exactly was going on. It seemed Miss Chang was infested with wrackspurts. And quite badly, at that.

"Not even denying it, huh?" Cho said, her face contorting into something rather ugly as she looked down on the confused blonde. "You've not been sleeping in your bed to avoid our harmless pranks

and decided you'd make me get a failing grade on my Charms essay!"

Luna's brow knit together in polite confusion. "I'm afraid I don't understand. I've never done anything to your schoolwork."

"Percussio!" Cho snarled, snapping her wand forward and at the younger girl, hitting her in the shoulder and making her drop her bag. "What's the matter, Lovegood? Can't fight back even after making friends with Potter? Why don't you grab that wand from your ugly ear and do something?"

Luna gently rubbed her shoulder where the older girl's hex stung her, but said nothing. She was simply falling back into old habits and decided not to do anything that could make them angrier and worked on not allowing herself to cry in front of them.

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"Miss Hermione," the Thundercat asked, appearing on the table a few feet away from her.

"Hm?" Hermione looked over to the side, seeing a fluffy fur person. "Can I help you ... er?"

The Thundercat ignored the unasked question for his name and chose instead to deliver his message. "The three girls who have been tormenting Miss Luna are stalking her in the fifth floor corridor. They do not appear to be planning a prank."

Hermione's eyes widened as she rushed from the table, not bothering with her school work or personal items other than drawing her wand and running up the flights of stairs.

Making it to the fifth floor, Hermione was thanking Harry for the exercise he had talked her into doing since she was able to get up there faster than normal and was quite a bit less winded than she felt she would normally be. Just as she was about to turn a corner, however, she stopped and pressed up against the wall, listening to what was happening.

"Percussio!" Cho snarled, snapping her wand forward and at the younger girl, hitting her in the shoulder and making her drop her bag.

"What's the matter, Lovegood? Can't fight back even after making friends with Potter? Why don't you grab that wand from your ugly ear and do something?"

'Come on, Luna! Do something to defend yourself!' Hermione's first instinct was to rush out and blast the other girls to kingdom come, but she had been talking with Luna about the other girls during their slumber parties most nights. Well, that's what they called them, but the nature of those slumber parties was so Luna didn't have to deal with these girls doing things just like this. Luna had promised that she would try to stand up for herself a little more and Hermione wanted to give her friend that chance now, while she could look out for Luna and step in any time it seemed her younger friend needed her to.

It was hard, Hermione knew. She actually still had a bit of trouble doing that, herself. Her first year, she was just like Luna, and usually still was. She spoke up to defend Harry more often than herself. But she had hoped she could talk Luna into doing so. It just didn't seem to work. The girl hadn't built up enough self confidence to do so this early.

But Hermione urged her friend to try, nonetheless.

"I haven't done anything to you," Hermione heard Luna say. "You're just picking on me."

"You're different," Marietta said, making a disgusted face. "You're always going on about imaginary creatures and you're dad's just as crazy as you are! I bet your mom isn't actually dead, just ran away to be a part of a normal family!"

Hermione could hear a jelly-legs curse being launched and drew her own wand, her anger beginning to consume her.

"Protego!" Luna called out loudly, shielding herself from a boils hex and stopping Hermione before the brunette rushed in. Hermione smiled as she realized Luna was finally doing it! She was standing up to her tormentors! Hermione couldn't believe how proud she was in that moment.

"I don't care what Potter thinks he's taught you," Cho seethed. "My family's got spells that can't be blocked, and this one is going to

make sure you never forget who is better than you!" The Asian witch ended with a yell. "Dǎo zhì tòng kǔ (to cause pain)!"

Hermione had no idea what was being launched, but her body was already moving before she had even realized it. She saw Cho's face go from fury to shock just as what looked like silver needles blasted from her wand and hit the brunette girl hard enough to send her backwards with an explosive grunt and sent her careening over Luna's prone form. The blonde girl followed Hermione's path with horrified silver eyes. What looked like six-inch long needles of silver light seemed to pierce the majority of Hermione's body before they shortened as if entering her body.

Then she began screaming.

Hermione's body convulsed to put her on her back and her back arched painfully as her body tensed. Her eyes were shut tightly and her scream rose rapidly in pitch until the other girls' ears actually began to hurt.

"Cho! Come on, we've got to get out of here!" Mandy yelled, barely being heard over Hermione's scream that still had yet to stop.

"Give her the counter curse!" Luna yelled, trying to get their attention.

The three girls turned and ran away as quickly as their legs could carry them while Luna rushed Hermione and tried to hug the girl to quieten her, failing miserably. After several seconds in which Hermione still didn't stop her scream, Luna finally had the idea to silence her and levitate her quickly to the hospital wing.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Luna screeched, throwing the large oak doors open with such a great force they nearly cracked when they hit the wall.

"What is it, child?" Poppy asked, coming into the hospital area quickly, alerted to possible actual danger from the girl's tone of voice. Then she saw Hermione's body, frozen in pain and her mouth open in a silent scream. "On the bed! Now!"

Luna quickly moved Hermione to a bed closest to the doors and then moved back, allowing the healer to do her work. "I've silenced her! Her screaming was causing me to be unable to concentrate



enough to do the spell. Cho Chang cast a spell on her in Chinese meant for me, I don't know what it was or what it does. It looked like silver needles hitting her. She ran off after I told her to apply the counter-curse," she rushed to explain as the medi-witch worked, getting a quick nod as she did.

"Go and- bloody hell! Don't you dare, Miss Granger!" Poppy muttered to herself as she worked, trying to work against what was apparently a fast-working clock. "Heart is close to stopping, need to lower the flow of adrenaline and ... got it! Need to figure out how to stop her from tensing her muscles like this or her heart will eventually give out, too! Damn foolish children!" Poppy growled as she summoned a dozen potions with a flick of her wand.

Luna's hands were fisted at her mouth as she watched through watery eyes, unable to tear her eyes away from Hermione's face and hearing every word as Pomfrey worked on Hermione, forgetting anyone else's presence as she fought to keep Hermione alive. For the first few minutes, all she heard was Poppy saying how bad things were and how Hermione's body was tearing itself apart, trying to writhe in agony, but being in so much pain that her body had locked up on her.

Nearly ten minutes into the work, Poppy had a breakthrough and managed to stabilize the young woman, but was fretting over how to keep the girl out of pain as Luna wished, for probably the thousandth time, that Hermione hadn't stepped in front of her and allowed the spell to hit her as it was meant to.

"There!" Pomfrey said triumphantly. "Stable! Now to put you to sleep to keep you unaware of the pain, poor dear," she mumbled as she slipped some dreamless sleeping potion into Hermione's open mouth in drops so as not to drown the girl. "There's no telling how long you'll be in here. You practically look like you suffered from the cruciatus! But at least you'll live, now."

Luna's hands finally lowered themselves from her mouth where they had been holding in her attempts at screaming and she suddenly felt calm sweep through her body. A sense of purpose overtook her and she rushed from the room, silencing her feet and dashing through the halls, not seeing Pomfrey turn and look for her, surprised to see her gone. Her body was pumping with adrenaline and her magic was singing to her senses.

"Where are they?" Luna asked into the air as a Thundercat came up to run alongside her.

"Second floor," Twinkle growled, feeling something deep within himself to answer or risk destruction.

"Why didn't you help her? Stop them or something?" Luna asked quietly, running at breakneck speeds.

"We are not able to," he replied, angry despite himself. "We consider you one of us, but we cannot actually assault a student unless in self defense. We have accepted you into our ranks, but while that connects us, we cannot hurt a student. We tried, but couldn't bring ourselves to actually do anything. It was how we were created. Only Master can tell us differently, and he is unconscious. How can we help you now?"

"You don't have to do anything," Luna said, somehow speeding up. "Just keep everyone else off the second floor."

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"Oh my god!" Marietta whined. "Potter is going to kill us! When he sees what happened to Granger, we'll be lucky if they find our bodies!"

"He won't do anything," Cho hissed. "He's laid up in the hospital and Lovegood won't tell or she knows the same thing will happen to her." Not actually believing that, the Asian witch was constantly looking over her shoulder, expecting each time to see Harry Potter right behind them.

"No one's ever asked her," Mandy rebuked. "Granger is too well-liked in this school because of her association with Potter. They're going to ask questions and she will answer them. We'll be lucky if they expel us before Potter wakes up."

"She's muggleborn," Cho said, turning on her friends. "They don't have the kind of support to get us expelled. At worst, we'll get a few detentions, the Slytherins will probably applaud us and-"

"-And Potter will kill us," Marietta finished for the other girl. "And even if he doesn't, which I really don't see happening at this point, old McGonagall will probably do something to us because we hurt her favorite pet."

Cho had a true moment of doubt when helplessness and uncertainty hit her for a moment before shaking her head. "It's our word against Lovegood's."

"And Granger's," Mandy amended. "When she wakes up, she'll tell for sure. There's no way in hell she won't."

"She ... won't be waking up," Cho said quietly, shocking the other two girls silent and making them stop, wide-eyed. Seeing them looking at her, Cho felt the need to elaborate. "What that spell does is cause all the nerve endings in the body to slowly die, causing extreme pain. Kind of like the cruciatus, except it doesn't stop when the spell stops. There really isn't a counter-curse. It just kind of ends on its own. The target tends to eventually just ... shut down."

"You ... You were going to use that on Lovegood?" Mandy asked quietly, feeling sick.

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"It's our word against Lovegood's."

Luna stood around a corner from where the other girls were at and bent her head down. She was mentally preparing herself for what she was about to do. She had no doubts whatsoever in doing it, but she felt a strange sense of calm and an almost giddy anticipation.

"And Granger's," Luna heard Mandy saying. "When she wakes up, she'll tell for sure. There's no way in hell she won't."

Luna wanted to cause these girls pain far worse than what they were doing to Hermione. Hermione was a good, kind, caring soul that Luna could honestly say she loved. Just as much as she loved Harry, even. They were her best friends.

And these bitches thought they had the right to dare harm one of them and escape punishment!

"She ... won't be waking up," Luna heard Cho say, making Luna listen, hoping for a nugget of knowledge to help her friend before taking action. "What that spell does is cause all the nerve endings in the body to slowly die, causing extreme pain. Kind of like the cruciatus, except it doesn't stop when the spell stops. It just kind of ends on its own. The target tends to eventually just ... shut down."

There was now no reason to go soft on them, Luna realized. They would learn what it meant to hurt Luna's friends. She would never lose them again.

Slowly, Luna began to chant under her breath, tapping her wand to an invisible beat.

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"Twinkle, twinkle, little star. How I wonder what you are..."

The three Ravenclaws stopped dead in their tracks as the voice of a small girl echoed hauntingly through the hallway they were in, seeming to come from each direction.

"Up above the world so high... Like a diamond in the sky..."

The sound of wind joined the voice, making it sound as though the wind was somehow causing the words. The terrified girls grouped together, wondering what was happening. "Who's there!" Cho yelled out as all three raised their wands.

The disembodied voice turned from quiet singing to humming, mixed with sobbing as a ghost came from the wall. It was a little girl, perhaps four years old in what looked like a shredded sleeping gown that did next to nothing to preserve her modesty. The shredded remains barely covered the appropriate areas even as it fluttered gently in an invisible breeze. Her skin glowed with a slight blue-white tint whereas most ghosts were purely white and her knee-length hair seemed to have some of the original golden honey color of her original hair color, even in death. It, too, fluttered very slowly in the non-existent breeze. Her face was obscured by two balled up fists that were rubbing her eyes as she cried, her bare feet leaving dark footprints in the floor and her hands dripping with a dark liquid.

"Who ... who are you?" Mandy asked. "Is this a Hogwarts ghost?" She asked her two friends, getting both to shake their heads.

"They hurt her," the little girl mumbled, her voice sounding as though coming from a deep well and sounding as though it had to catch up to how quickly she was actually speaking.

"Wh-who?" Marietta asked.

Slowly, the little girl turned to the other three living girls and dropped her hands to her side slowly. Her white sleeping gown morphed from shredded white clothing into a black dress with a dark red apron on the front that appeared like something little girls several decades in the past would wear. At the same time, pale blue lips turned a blood red and golden hair turned deep black, contrasting with the now white skin ghosts were famous for.

"You," the little girl growled out in something half human and half beast. Then, singing in the same melody and same rhythm as the first song, she began a new one. "Run, run, very fast ... Enjoy these moments, they're your last..."

The little girl grinned as the torches lighting the hallway began to dim as the flames died out and began to cast only dark red light, causing the shadows to grow and expand.

The three girls had already turned and were running as quickly as they could down the hall, legs pumping quickly and each girl beginning to cry as innocent, childlike laughter seemed to follow them. They turned the first corner they came across, only to find the little girl resting on her hands and feet on the ceiling, her head turned like an owl's before the little girl began to crawl along the top of the hallway after them.

"Run!" Marietta yelled needlessly.

The girls ran for what seemed like several minutes before coming up upon their first intersection. Each hallway but the one they had run from was black and obscured in shadow.

"Fuck!" Cho yelled. "Where is she!" The three looked down the hall they had come from, seeing nothing down the hallway. Then they

heard quick scampering from one of the black halls, then a second one.

"Reducto!" Marietta yelled, sending her spell down a blackened hallway and seeing it swallowed by the shadow. "What the hell!"

"Oh my god! Did you see that?" Mandy shrieked. "It just disappeared! What the hell is going on!"

Innocent giggling echoed around them as the humming rose in volume, then suddenly died.

Out of nowhere, the little girl dropped from the ceiling and grabbed Marietta by the ankles and pulled, dropping the girl to the floor with a wet-sounding smack and a cracking sound, causing her face to hit the floor hard enough to break her nose and splatter the floor with blood and three teeth before she was dragged into one of the shadowy halls with a scream, leaving claw marks on the stone floor where her nails filed away and leaving two of them behind where she tried to get a grip.

Cho and Mandy could hear the other girl screaming before hearing a crunching sound and then nothing as warm blood splattered their faces.

"Run!" Cho yelled, turning and rushing down the hallway that was still lit since she had just seen the monster drag the other girl into the other hallway. The older girl tried to ignore the bloody hand and foot prints on the ceiling as she ran as fast as she could. Mandy was faster, however, and was leaving Cho behind as they neared the next intersection of hallways. "Wait for me!"

Mandy stopped in the lit intersection, ignoring the other girl and wondering which way to go since this was just like the other end.

Cho was five feet from the intersection and catching up to Mandy when the ghost girl flew from one of the dark hallways and ran grabbed the younger girl with a guttural snarl, launching both into the darkened hallway, but not before Mandy tried to kick herself free, causing a leg to catch on their path through the entrance and causing it to snap, the bone ripping through the flesh and being left behind as a shoe fell from the foot it had been on as it spun in the air.

Cho skid to a stop and backpedaled a dozen feet into the hallway and back into the light as she relieved her bladder on herself, pressing her back against the wall and looking rapidly back and forth from one end of the hallway and the other, able to make out both intersections down what was a freakishly long hallway.

The lone girl could hear gurgling and clawing as wet ripping sounds were overshadowed by the sound of loud, open-mouthed chewing. A moment later, a finger flew down the hall and hit the terrified girl in the face, causing her to scream in fright and kick the sole digit away frantically.

Then the torches on both ends went out, leaving both ends of the hallway shrouded in darkness.

Then the next torch on each end.

Then the next.

Cho curled into a fetal position on her feet as all but the torch right above her went out, leaving her in a sphere of light about five feet on either side of her.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star..."

"Stop it!" Cho shrieked. "Leave me alone!" She was answered with innocent giggling.

Cho began to sob as the torch above her slowly began to dim.

"Please," Cho begged. "Please just leave me alone."

Before the torch died, Cho had just enough time to see the bloody, smiling face of the girl peek through the stone wall across from her before the girl snarled, baring her teeth with flesh still stuck between them and launched herself at Cho's face, beginning to devour her as she had the others, feeling her flesh being ripped apart in pieces even as she tried to fight the tiny ghost girl.

And then the sharp teeth began to rip and tear at her chest, going for her heart and she knew no more.

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Luna stopped chanting and slowly, calmly put her wand behind her ear as she walked around the corner where the girls had stopped all activity the moment her illusion began. They had fallen to the ground where they stood and their faces were frozen in expressions of horror. Their eyes wide and their mouths locked in silent screams of terror.

"I wish I could have done more," she told them, sighing as she physically put them to sit up against the wall. "But I'm afraid this was the most advanced thing I know of."

Luna stood and glared at the three girls. "But I will show you mercy this time. I won't strip you of your clothes as you would do to me since this was for Hermione." The blonde girl turned and began skipping away before stopping at the corner from where she had come. "Oh! I almost forgot."

The tiny Ravenclaw stepped forward and smacked each girl once on the face. "I had promised Hermione I'd begin standing up for myself. What I did to you first was for her. That was for everything you'd done to me."

"Hm, hm, hm, hm..." Luna began to hum the twinkling star song her mother had once sung to her as she made her way back to the hospital wing. Now that her business was completed, she was needed by her friends.

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Harry yawned as he opened his eyes, feeling strangely contented as he realized he was cuddling a warm, female body once again. Then he blinked in confusion as he realized this female body was a little heavier than he was used to and that the hair on the head resting on his shoulder was brown instead of blonde. 'This is either really good ... or really bad...'

"Good morning, Harry," Luna said with drowsy eyes as she put his glasses on him.

"Luna?" Harry asked, looking around and finding himself in the hospital wing. "Aw crap. The dementors again."



"Yes. You fell from your broom during the game yesterday. Then you performed some powerful magic, saved yourself from the dementors, and then you floated until some time this early morning around three."

Harry nodded with a yawn before realizing Hermione was laying in bed with him and between himself and Luna. "No offense, but why are the two of you here? Have you been awake all night?" He wasn't sure if there was any other way that she would know when he stopped floating otherwise.

"Good, you're awake Mister Potter!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, pulling back the privacy curtain and then frowning at what she saw.

"Miss Lovegood, how many times do I have to tell you to stop putting those two in the same bed? They need to rest and recover by themselves!"

"They prefer to be together," Luna said simply, looking nonplussed.

"Regardless, Miss Granger should be in her own bed." The healer attempted to float Hermione to her own bed before realizing the bed was following her. "Did you use a sticking charm on my patients to keep them in bed together?" Poppy asked, wondering why that shocked her so much.

"You kept moving them," Luna said, sounding as though it should have been obvious.

"Why should Hermione have her own bed?" Harry asked, not liking what he was hearing.

Poppy softened as Harry asked and decided the boy would probably end up going to Miss Granger's bed anyway, so decided to leave them be for now. "Perhaps Miss Lovegood should tell you. I will simply state that she is going to be fine, though she will be in here for at least a week, possibly two."

"What happened?" Harry asked Luna as Poppy turned and left them to their own devices. Normally, she'd listen in in case she could learn something new, but she had other patients who required another check-up. That, and if she didn't hear what she thought was going to be said, then she had no obligation to report it. These three

girls were found earlier that morning by the Head Girl, Miss Clearwater, while doing her rounds. After what they had done to Miss Granger, Poppy was willing to make herself scarce. It went against her usual habits, but they would heal and suffered no physical trauma.

The same could not be said for Miss Granger.

Luna explained what had happened in the hallway between herself and the other Ravenclaws, then what had happened to Hermione. She then went on to explain the girls responsible were already in the hospital wing and what she had done. "Apparently," she told him, "their minds shattered during the event. Physically, they are perfectly fine, but they will have to have their minds professionally healed."

Harry looked with wide eyes at Luna laying in front of him. Her head was bowed and her cheeks were covered in tears with her shoulders shaking. He had never had any clue that the girl was capable of such a thing and would honestly say he would never have thought her capable of it, but here she was, just-turned thirteen, and having taken out an enemy more brutally than anything he had ever done.

"Do...", she hiccuped and hesitated just a moment. "Do you hate me for it?"

Harry could never hate this girl, no matter what she did. She was his friend and did worse to those girls than anything he could have done to them. He reached over and gently held her chin in his hand, causing Luna to flinch before she looked into his eyes. "I could never hate you, Luna. What you did is what I only wish I had been able to do. I'm thankful to have you as a friend." Feeling some urge to try and comfort the girl, knowing words alone wouldn't mean as much to her as anything else, he leaned over and hugged her tightly to him, causing her to release a flood of tears.

"Thank you!" She whispered harshly. "Thank you, thank you!"

"Will Hermione really be okay?" Harry asked, pulling back and looking at his sleeping best friend. Her brow was knit together and twitching even while under the influence of dreamless sleeping and pain relieving potions.

"Madam Pomfrey was able to stabilize her," Luna admitted, "but has to keep her in an induced sleep to hide her from the pain. From what Cho said, it will end when it ends. But Madam Pomfrey contacted Cho's parents and explained what had happened and demanded a counter-spell. They are looking for one, but Mister Chang seems to believe there isn't one. At least not for the damage already done. Madam Pomfrey was able to stop the spell from doing more damage, but with the current damage, she'll be in pain if she wakes up. Her nerves have to heal before Madam Pomfrey will let her become conscious again."

"Which is exactly why I didn't want her getting moved about," Poppy explained as she entered Harry's private area again, having heard the last of their conversation. "The damage is over her entire body. Until she has time to heal, any physical contact could cause her pain."

"Is there no way to speed up the healing?" Harry asked as both he and Luna pulled away from Hermione a little so they were close, but not touching her. Luna looked rather upset that she was only being told that bit of news now, however.

"None, I'm afraid. Much like healing from burns, the nerves must simply grow back."

"What about burn-healing salve?" Harry asked, thinking back to his fourth year and the dragon challenge. "Does that help nerves?"

"No," Poppy said with a sad shake of her head. "It helps the healing process with burns, yes, but that's because it helps the whole body recover where it is applied. This, however, is internal. The nerves themselves are the only thing that need to recover."

"Maybe Fawkes?" Harry offered hesitantly. "He's helped me in the past. Maybe for this, too?"

"Unfortunately, Fawkes is not an option," Pomfrey said, beginning to get upset that he would think she hadn't thought of that. "Miss Granger's nerves aren't actually damaged, but are reacting as they are and they need time to heal in the sense that there is spell residue upon them. I was able to stop the spell itself but, for lack of a better way to describe it, the spell was like the syrup you used on Professor McGonagall. The spell is the syrup, and Miss Granger's

nerve endings are the Professor. In a sense, there is nothing to truly heal, we just have to wait for the magic to go away."

Harry frowned and looked down at Hermione, feeling helpless and hating it.

"Now, Mister Potter, you're free to go, and I suggest doing so rather than sticking about. The magic you're putting out isn't going to help Miss Granger and if you hurry, you can catch the last bit of breakfast."

Harry blinked in confusion before glancing at his bracelets and seeing only one percent still locked away. 'Seal ninety-nine percent,' he grumbled, reconstituting his limiting seal. It was no wonder he was so tired. He'd somehow managed to use up almost all of his magic the day before and he was able to feel the lack of energy, even though it was more than he normally had access to.

"I guess I'll go let Ron know what happened," he said, getting out of bed and transfiguring his Quidditch uniform into school robes.

"Mister Potter," Pomfrey began as he walked towards the door with Luna following him. "I don't mind you visiting Miss Granger, but do keep any visits relatively short. No more than an hour at a time. For some reason, you seem to radiate magic and that could affect Miss Granger's healing process. A little here and there won't be a problem, but any longer than that and I feel it may stall her progress while you visit."

Harry couldn't really speak, so he simply nodded and left, heading towards the seventh floor corridor, but not towards the common room. He instead went to the Room of Requirement with Luna in tow where she got to watch as he dueled what looked like an evil doppelganger in a rather frightening display of power.

Had he not already been so weakened from the majority of his power having left the day before, she would have really seen what he was capable of. But for this one time, she was the first to witness his ability to fight using both wand and wandless magic beyond simple displays.

'I can't really blame him. I would be doing much the same if this was my way,' Luna thought to herself, petting a Snorkack from behind a

shield the room provided her with. Right now, she just wanted something to cuddle.

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Harry stood by the window in the Gryffindor common room while Luna lounged in a chair a few feet away, not wanting to intrude on his thoughts and not willing to leave him alone. He dueled his evil twin to a standstill until he was just too tired to keep moving and was still quite sore from it. Apparently, the room knew better than to keep the other Harry at full power when the real Harry wasn't, so it was always just a touch faster or stronger than he was and always pushed him to his limits, even when he was barely able to hold up his wand arm.

A large part of his actions was anger at what had happened to Hermione, but another large part was because it hadn't happened like this the first time around, which meant he was the cause and at fault. He wasn't sure how, but he knew it was true. And what was worse, he had no idea how it had happened! People were changing! He once thought of Cho Chang as this dark, exotic beauty with a pretty smile and soft demeanor, but now, he saw she was an absolute bitch! Not only for what had happened to Hermione, but for how she had been treating Luna.

That had been happening before he came back in time. So, at the very least, she was always like this. He just didn't know it.

Another part of his anger and frustration was that he was helpless to give Hermione any form of aid. His rings provided him with whatever information they could on how to help her, but there was one sad fact to the legality of what had happened: Hermione was muggleborn.

While Hermione had rights in their world, this was basically nothing more than a school yard squabble, as far as the legal system was concerned. Hermione was not a part of an influential family, or rich enough to have that fact overlooked, and she was not the intended or betrothed of anyone in power, putting her under their aegis.

As much as he hated to say it, her rights basically extended to civil rights, and even then, it wasn't much. She was one step above

squib, two above muggle and three above sub-creature in the eyes of the law.

And Harry was pissed.

He knew muggleborn had had it rough in little ways, like horrible exchange rates dictated by the Ministry and restrictions on what they could own or purchase, such as land or wizarding businesses. But he had honestly believed they would have basic rights when attacked. As it turned out, they didn't unless by a class lower than themselves. Luna was actually safe from reprisal just because she was pureblood. And because she and Cho were both considered purebloods, what happened between them was considered above the laws of the school outside of student ethics, which hadn't been enforced.

Harry had never really had the cause to do so, but he was now staring blindly out the window and letting knowledge from his rings go through his mind as he looked up laws related to muggleborns and Hermione, specifically. In his past, he could remember Delores Umbridge using the laws as her own word, sending muggleborn to camps to be exterminated and basically doing as she pleased. As it turned out, the things she did was actually enforcing older laws that were mostly ignored right now simply because there were more than ten times the number of half blood or muggleborns when compared to pureblood and, without direct influence from the Ministry, they couldn't enforce those laws without retaliation.

But in all of Harry's searching, there was one glaring hole in all of these laws. None of them pertained directly to Hogwarts.

It was only then, after almost a half year back in time, that Harry remembered what he was told about the Ministry being unable to control Hogwarts. He decided in that moment that he was going to wrestle control back from the Ministry for Magic and force some changes within the school.

"Harry mate?" Ron hesitated, knowing Harry had been getting closer to Hermione and was obviously angry. He knew it wasn't the best time, but it was decided for him that he was Harry's best friend, at least that was conscious, and he would be the safest one to tell Harry what had happened.

"Yea, Ron?" Harry asked hollowly, making plans to contact Griphook.

"Um, I know it isn't the best time, but we thought you needed to know that when you fell off your broom, the wind blew it into the Whomping Willow and..." He trailed off as he held up a bundle of twigs and sticks in a ratty blanket.

Green eyes looked dispassionately at the broken broom, wondering why they felt he should care about a bunch of twigs when he had a perfectly good Firebolt ... 'Oh yea. I don't yet.' Harry nodded, uncaring with more important things on his mind. "Don't worry about it. It's just a broom. Toss it into the fire if you want. Should warm the place up a bit more."

Ron lowered the bundle in his arms, unsure of what to do, but following the advice and tossing the whole thing into the fire, turning it from an orange and yellow flame to one of purple and green as the magic was burned by the flames. Not sure what else to do, Ron walked by Harry and paused. "I'm not happy she got hurt, either, you know. But Pomfrey said she'll be as good as new soon. G'night."

Harry watched Ron's reflection in the window pane as the redhead followed the rest of the boys to bed for the night. He couldn't really blame Ron for his lack of reaction towards Hermione's current state. Ron was still at a point in his development where, if he couldn't get angry at it, then all he could really do was ignore it and pretend it didn't affect him, regardless of how it really did. Ron knew she was hurt, but didn't really know how to help her any better than Harry could. If it wasn't something that could be solved with a wave of the wand or a bowl of chicken noodle soup, he was at a loss. The only good thing about such a mindset was, if you weren't dead or dying and would be okay, then everything was okay for now.

Harry could remember feeling that way. He missed it, sometimes.

A few moments after Ron was gone, Harry turned and went to the couch where he could write on the table, almost immediately being glomped by Luna at his side when he sat down. He couldn't really blame the girl for that, any more than he could Ron's apathetic attitude. She was feeling horrible at what had happened to Hermione for what she felt was her own fault even though it was really Cho and the other two.

"Didn't you finish all your homework?" Luna asked, seeing him pulling out parchment and a quill and beginning to write.

"I'm writing a letter to Griphook at Gringotts," Harry explained, trying to write slowly to keep his penmanship a little neater. "He's my accounts manager. When I claimed my emancipation, I ... er, learned I have a lot of say in what happens in the school. I'm planning on seeing if I can do that and if they can send me any information or if I have to come get it."

"Oh. I didn't realize your holdings would keep an accounts manager without anyone to oversee them," Luna said, thinking accounts that couldn't be authorized to do anything would be locked down from her admittedly limited experience with banks. Her father wasn't too trusting of them. He just allowed her a few vaults so they had an excuse to ride the mining cart since she rather enjoyed that and teach her about money management.

"They didn't," Harry replied distractedly. "I made him the accounts manager because he was the first goblin I met and always answered my questions. He was the teller I went to when I first came into the wizarding world."

Luna blinked. "You made a teller the manager of your accounts? Did you make sure he knew what to do?"

"They don't really do a whole lot," Harry explained, having thought of this before in the previous timeline. Hermione had been curious when researching ways to get into Gringotts to get the Hufflepuff cup from the LeStrange vault and had forced him into learning a bit about it since he would need to know anyway and it was a good cover for getting into the bank at the time. He didn't know much, but he knew enough to know that appointing such a lower-level employee to his accounts basically gained him an ally that would be eager to please and would do quite a bit to maintain his new status.

"Basically, they do whatever I tell them in relation to buying or selling things and work as a liaison between myself and the bank, getting me information whenever I need it. It just costs a bit each time I use their services. They're all about making gold and profit so, letting him watch the account activity and basically getting me things when I need them, he gets paid, making him happy."



"Don't they invest the gold into things?" She asked, curious about what she had learned and what Harry apparently knew. "I thought they basically invested the money into things and kept the money mobile while always keeping enough on-hand to give you whatever you request, as long as you've enough for it."

"They do invest, yes," Harry said. "From what I understand, the bank gets its money from fees and charges and they take a percentage of whatever they invest in on your behalf. But they don't invest my money, just what is considered theirs. He could invest mine, but I haven't authorized that."

"Oh," Luna said, watching him scribble. "I suppose they also make a large profit with their warding and enchanting ventures, too. I wonder if they really sleep on mounds of gold."

"I don't know," Harry said after a moment. That had given him an idea that he decided to add into the letter as well with the various details he was looking for. While not the same thing, he hoped, Sirius had once given him advice that seemed prudent at this point in time: 'Remember, kiddo! Safety first! You don't want to be wishing you'd taken the right precautions after the fact!'

At least, Harry hoped it wasn't goblins Sirius was talking about. He was fairly sure he understood the subject matter itself...

Roughly a half hour after he had begun, and after the last of the students had gone to bed for classes the next morning, Harry was finished with his missive and whistled for Hedwig, the pitch dropping as he had done the previous year. Moments later, Hedwig flew through the window that opened automatically for her.

"Hey girl. Wanna deliver a letter for me? I want to try to find a way to help Hermione," Harry told the snowy owl, stroking her plumage and taking a moment to lavish her with attention. "Thanks. Take it to Griphook at Gringotts." Harry watched Hedwig fly away for a few moments before turning to go to bed and seeing Luna standing there, looking at him nervously.

"Um," she began, fidgeting. "I know my bed will be okay now, but ... I was wondering ... With Hermione and all..." She trailed off, unsure of how to ask a boy if you could sleep with him without it sounding dirty.

"I think I could use the company tonight, if you'd like to stay here again," Harry said, actually feeling better with the thought of having Luna sleeping with him to cuddle with. He felt it would help with knowing that Hermione was hurting and he was unable to do anything about it. Even going to her side under his invisibility cloak was forbidden just because of his presence.

Luna nodded mutely, sniffing slightly. Almost without thinking about it, she tapped her forehead and melted away from view as a disillusionment charm covered her, just in case any of his dorm mates were awake. "Thank you," she said quietly after disappearing.

The next morning, even to himself, Harry wouldn't complain about cold toes burrowed into uncomfortable places. He would just be happy they were there.

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Mister Potter:

To your first request regarding information on Hogwarts: School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I have found the agreement in question. It was not easy, nor was it cheap. The Ministry for Magic seems to have had it misfiled under a completely unrelated heading and all public records of such an agreement were too old to be read with any degree of accuracy, even though records from even further back are in excellent shape. These changes seem to have been made recently, as well. Anything pertaining to the actual rights the Ministry had was simply missing due to the aforementioned reason with the header. I had a Ministry lackey track the information down for us since there are no other records available other than that which is in your vaults, but as you are apparently unaware, only a human with a blood line to one of your school founders is capable of opening those document cases. While that would be quite literally dozens of humans, we cannot pull the information from your vaults and, as goblins, cannot access it. While this isn't exactly necessary information, I felt it prudent to let you know how hard I had to work to gather it so quickly so you would be aware of why you were charged so much. My fee, on top of what was required to pay the lackey of the Ministry, has been deducted from your account, totaling one hundred galleons.

Something you should be aware of, Mister Potter. The Ministry has these records being monitored quite closely with the knowledge that all of the Founders' heirs have returned, hence the high charge. Seventy-five galleons was from the Ministry lackey due to what appears to be hazardous information requests.

To your business request. What you are asking for is, while not unprecedented, certainly abnormal in nature. It is doable, but you must understand the nature of your request. Each interchangeable item will cost its normal rate. We do not provide bulk discounts as you humans do.

In total, each enchanted item will cost one hundred galleons each and, from the numbers you were referring to, upwards of over four thousand galleons. While you've got more than enough to cover this expenditure, ensure you want so many created. We do not do refunds, either.

Also, we have not received a copy of your Last Will and Testament. If you still wish to craft one, we will accept it. Just remember it is always best to get those things finished before they are needed.

Accounts Manager,

Griphook

"Cheerful lot," Harry grumbled the next Thursday. It had been five days since Hermione's attack and she still did not really show any actual improvement. She looked basically like she did Sunday; she looked like she was sleeping.

Luna had not been taking Hermione's incapacitation well. She blamed herself for what had happened and only really spoke to Harry or Hermione's sleeping form. Any time a teacher asked her a question, it usually resulted in a blank look with very little blinking. After the first day, they didn't ask her anymore.

There had been gentle inquiry into the mental states of the other girls, but Harry had simply stated that he was told what had happened to Hermione by Luna and stopped his storytelling there. Whether the faculty forgot or chose not to ask if there was more, he really didn't care. As it was, Dumbledore was the only one who had asked. Everyone else realized he had an iron-clad alibi. Not that it

would matter. Dumbledore had a strange habit of letting damn near everything slide, of which this was a perfect example.

"Are you ready for bed, Harry?" Luna asked, putting her homework away. She had barely been listening during classes and never wrote a single word down. For those that Hermione didn't share with Harry, Luna skipped her own classes and wrote notes verbatim for her absent friend, feeling it was the least she could do. She got the class information from Harry and was relatively thankful Harry advised her to not worry about Divination since Hermione was planning on dropping it.

She wasn't. Not yet at least, but Harry felt it helping the girl out and helping to avoid discussing Hermione's schedule was for the best.

"Yea. I'll send my reply tomorrow," Harry said, leading Luna's disillusioned form to the dorm room. Some part of him felt he should know better than to let a girl sleep in his bed each night for the past week, but he had been sharing a bed with Hermione for about a year and had become not only comfortable with it, but preferred it to being alone. There was just something about sleeping with someone that was comforting and ... addictive. As he crawled into bed, his final thoughts were thinking over how that could very well explain Luna's preference to spending the night with either him or Hermione.

Some time later, Luna turned in Harry's arms to face him, watching him sleep and listening to his steady breathing. "Are you awake?" She whispered, holding her breath to see if his breathing changed and happy to note it hadn't.

"Thank you for being my friend, Harry," Luna said quietly, ensuring she could barely hear herself, much less anyone else hear her. "Even after getting Hermione hurt, you stuck by me and didn't hate me after what I did to Cho and the others."

Luna was quiet as she continued to listen for a moment, ensuring his breathing was still steady and deep. "I thought I might have had a crush on you, you know," she admitted, her cheeks pinking slightly. "You were this powerful man who was going out of his way to protect and care for me, even just befriend me, really. You rescued me from being locked up for who knows how long and just held me when I was sick."

Oh so gently, she trailed a finger over the contours of Harry's face and neck, taking care to get as close as possible without actually touching him. "I thought it was hero worship. That I was falling into that knight in shining armor cliché. But I didn't. Not really."

The blonde girl sighed, succumbing to the urge to stroke Harry's hair. "I'm only three months younger than you, almost to the day," she breathed out dejectedly. "I know my feelings, even if I didn't really understand them at first. I realized rather quickly that I loved you."

Quietly, she shook as she withheld a giggle. "For some reason, it's as if I knew you for far longer than two months. I get these glimpses of things that I don't really understand. Like déjà vu, only more detailed. I get those feelings sometimes when I go somewhere new. I feel like I can see things that have happened long ago. But this is so much different."

Realizing she'd been raising her voice to near normal levels, she quieted and listened intently for any sounds of anyone awake, most especially from Harry. After a moment, she continued, quieter. "I admit I don't know if this is the kind of love my parents had, but I know I could never be without you in my life, even if everyone else was there still."

"But, I also know that you seem to be dedicated to Hermione already. You don't have to worry about that, you know. She's just waiting for some kind of sign that what she keeps thinking she's seeing isn't just some new affectionate you or your hormones going after the closest pair of bits," Luna told him, hoping this would somehow penetrate and he would remember, subconsciously at least, that he just had to try a little harder for Hermione.

"I promise I won't ever stand in the way of your happiness. I know you want Hermione and I'll do my best to help you both along without betraying either of your trusts. But for that, I only want one thing from you, Harry."

Luna swallowed as her breathing sped just a touch. The one thing she would ever want from Harry, the most she would ever allow herself to take from Hermione. "A kiss..." she breathed out, little more than a whisper of sound.

She leaned forward and licked her lips before she pressed them lightly upon Harry's, applying the smallest amount of suction and burning the feeling of his lips on hers, his taste, his heat and even the smell of him into her mind so she could keep it with her forever. Seconds later, she pulled back, letting out a shuddering breath with her lips swollen and her heart racing.

The small blonde girl smiled warmly and curled into Harry's chest, feeling contented and suddenly very drowsy now that she had that one memory to forever last her. She quietly pulled out a tiny crystal fairy figurine and stored everything within it, thanking the gods for her father's gift. 'Just in case I need help remembering in my later years. Thank you Harry, even if you won't ever know how you've helped me.'

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Harry awakened early Friday morning, regretting the fact that he promised himself not to complain mentally about cold toes in sensitive places, and performed his morning ablutions and changed into his workout clothes. He had worked extra hard the last few days during his exercises, looking forward to being able to exhaust his body. A few trips to Madam Pomfrey and he learned his magical core was recharging faster than he was wearing it down since he limited himself to two percent power for that whole week plus one more.

It was also a good excuse to get rid of whatever magic he could use before visiting with Hermione for a little while.

Today, however, was going to be the Wizengamot meeting that he apparently couldn't miss without almost guaranteeing time in Azkaban, and he planned only to get some light exercise in so he was loose and limber without being tired or magically weak, just in case. It was curious, he noted, that the only reason he was aware of the Wizengamot meeting was because of that Court Scribe that had taken the time out to alert him to it. He had yet to receive any other missives or alerts warning him that he had to be there and he was seriously wondering why.

Today was also a big day for another reason. The public would soon be learning who held the Founders' seats, and he was not looking forward to that. They had been spending more than just a little gold

in trying to figure out who held them, and there had been many suspicions, all wrong, put through. It seemed the day had arrived for them all to learn.

Harry entered the room of requirement and began stretching, standing straight up at attention and then bending from the waist to touch his toes, he held that position for several long seconds before rising and then screaming in unholy horror as he saw Lora standing before him, her face one of fury. She was dressed in inky black robes and had a scythe raised above her head for a brief moment before throwing it down in a chopping motion.

Harry fell backwards and saw the blade slowing so it went down at a similar speed before the long, jagged point plunged into the stone floor close enough to his danglies to cut the seam.

"Squeak!" Harry tried to scream, but all that came out was a squeaking as fear closed his throat.

"You stupid, insufferable, egotistical, mentally challenged, man!" Lora roared, jerking the scythe back up from the ground hard enough to cause chunks to rip from the floor and tossing it over her shoulder.

"What!" Harry finally screamed, scuttling backwards until his back hit the door.

"Do you have any idea how much you've fucked up! Do you have any idea what happened! I swear, killing you right now would almost be worth a demotion and working with slimy demons and tentacle monsters!"

"What the hell are you talking about!" Harry screamed back, ultimately confused.

"GAH!" Lora reared her head back and threw her arms out to the side and let her own power run free, destroying the Room of Requirement and rebuilding it as she vented her anger. Dozens of statues of Harry formed into existence only to be blasted away with the extremely large, wicked-looking scythe that Harry really didn't think such a petite woman should be able to move, much less swing around so freely.

For a brief moment, Harry would swear he saw damned souls being tortured in the fires that rose up like pillars from the ground. He was left quivering in fear by the door, wondering what had pissed this woman off so badly.

After several long minutes of mental trauma, Lora finally fixed everything and then looked back at Harry, glaring daggers and promising painful retribution. "Listen you little fuck. Because of you, I've just had my ass handed to me for multiple reasons, and you're responsible for all of them!"

Harry wasn't able to move, he had no idea what she was talking about.

"Remember when I told you I took over the Reaper contracts for some of your friends?" She groaned as she got a blank look. "When I became their Angel of Death!" She roared, getting a frantic nod of Harry's head. Right now, he'd do anything to appease this woman's temper. He was half-tempted to lay on his back and show his tender underside to her as a sign of submission, but felt that would only piss her off more.

"I became Hermione's Angel of Death, too, along with Luna's, Neville's and others' and then this shit with Hermione happens at the same fucking time I'm getting my ass reamed for jumping in to save your ass because you didn't keep your head about you during the Quidditch game!" Lora yelled, getting very much within Harry's personal bubble as her face came inches from his own.

"As if that's not enough, you go and become friends with Luna and now she's falling in love with you because you can't spend all your damn time with Hermione!"

"What?" Harry asked, finally hearing something he understood.

Lora growled and stalked away from Harry, turning and sitting where a chair formed just in time for her butt to fall on. "Let's start from the beginning, again!"

Harry finally felt the courage to get up and walk over to sit across from Lora, giving her his full attention.



"The Quidditch game," Lora said, sounding as though her anger was finally leaving her as she began to speak normally, if a bit coldly. "Dumbledore was supposed to save your sorry ass. That was the original timeline. However, because of how much you're showing an independent streak, he decided to seek validation in his lonely and pathetic life by seeing if the Prophecy would hold up and you'd live unless Voldemort himself killed you and because you knew what was going to happen, you felt overconfident in yourself and wound up going higher where the dementors were able to swarm you faster and in greater numbers than originally had happened and then you began to plummet, again, to your untimely demise."

Harry gulped. When put that way, it was rather ... er ... damning.

"Because you were being a fucking male and thinking about how fucked up it was to play Hufflepuff instead of Slytherin, you allowed your anger to grow and had the dementors feasting on your soul too quickly for you to do anything about it. Strike number one with this crap with Hermione as strike two."

Harry shuffled his feet, wishing he could just curl up into a ball and hide from this woman.

"The next problem, believe it or not, is even worse."

"How?" Harry asked, his face paling more than it was when a large scythe had gone for his lower half's most important area.

"Remember when I told you that you've got multiple soul mates and how another was in Hogwarts? But I didn't tell you who it was because it didn't matter since you already had been forming a bond with Hermione?"

"Yea," Harry said, confused. "You also said there was a third one somewhere else."

"Luna was the other one in Hogwarts," Lora deadpanned. "And you've been by her side almost constantly since coming back to Hogwarts, forming yet more bonds."

"But wait, can I have more than one soul mate at a time?" Harry asked. "I thought that, once you got one, you were together or something."

"No," Lora said, rolling her eyes in disgust and annoyance. "I tried telling you before. Soul mates are people who get along exceedingly well with one another. Very much in tune, if you will. Sometimes, they are more aware of each other than others, and sometimes it comes about over a little time. Some will know each other as soon as they see one another. Others, like you and Hermione, are so damn skittish that you've basically got to be shoved into a closet together and not allowed out until one of you is pregnant!"

Harry's mind began to activate in that moment before Lora threw her shoe at him, knocking him on the side of the head. "Don't even think about it! I swear, if I have to sit here while you think perverted thoughts, I'm turning you into a woman in a French Maid costume and sending you to Knockturn Alley!"

Harry whimpered, signaling Lora's continuation of her story.

"Listen. No match is so perfect that you won't have to work at it. If you stop caring about your partner's happiness, then you will grow apart. It's as simple as that," Lora said. "All of those stories where two soul mates are bound together in some Holy marriage<sup>(1)</sup> is preposterous! Us forcing two souls into love or into some form of bond together is no different than Molly Weasley using love potions. All relationships require commitment and honest affection or they will be empty and unfulfilling. That's why soul mates get out of the relationship as much as they put into it."

"You make it sound like you aren't even the ones who make the soul mates," Harry said, beginning to understand.

"We aren't," Lora said with a shrug. "Some souls are just naturally in tune with one another. Some, like Snape, are not in tuned with anyone. That's also why you will sometimes get a triumvirate in which three souls total are soul mates."

"You mean we-"

"No," Lora rebuked before Harry even finished the thought. "You are compatible to each girl, but they aren't towards each other. They could be extremely good friends, or lovers if they chose to be, but neither is really that way inclined," Lora said. 'Such a pity, too.

Those quiet, bookish ones are always so wild... Oh well,' she thought with a mental sigh.

"The point of all of this is that soul mates are not bonded by a kiss. That's a romantic sentiment from centuries past where romance novels felt it an easy method by which anyone is capable of potentially finding a soul mate. But, have you not kissed Hermione, before? Or she you? Have you ever suddenly found yourself desiring her like those stories?"

Harry blushed, causing Lora to groan. "I mean after a kiss, you stupid idiot."

"Oh. Uh, well..."

"Ignore the sexual side of things, damnit!"

Harry hunkered his head down, doing as he was told.

"Okay," Lora said with a sigh. "Basically, things with Hermione are progressing wonderfully. When you decided to treat it like a real relationship and not something that was a sure thing, you fell into the right path. You just have to treat Hermione with respect and basically be who you are, and she will decide if she wants to be with you or not."

"And ... er ... Luna?" Harry asked. "How is this supposed to work, exactly?"

Lora sighed and all of the anger in her left at that moment. She was enough of a girly girl and closet romantic to respect soul bonds and root for them, every single time, but this time, it just wasn't to be. Harry had to be with Hermione. "That's the bad news in all of this," she said with another sigh.

Harry narrowed his eyes as most of the fear he harbored went away. Lora's tone of voice was not one conducive to Luna's good fortune.

"Harry, Luna set herself upon a path when she chose to seek retribution on Cho Chang and her two friends for Hermione rather than herself. She chose to follow you and stay with you, no matter what. However, she knows she's falling in love with you, but that you are pursuing Hermione, so she has decided she won't get in the way

of that. But that's just the problem. If she stays away from you, she'll naturally crave your attentions and not seek another male, no matter who else could be possible."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked.

"This Luna will follow you through the war to come and she will honestly be happy for you and Hermione, even working hard to ensure you both get together and stay together. But she will become disillusioned with her life, getting lonely and protective of both of you, seeing you as a single package. As such, during fights, she will become progressively more lethal in battle while putting herself into more risk with each one in a subconscious attempt to commit suicide to protect the two of you and be able to have an excuse to leave you in a way she feels is worth dying for."

"What!" Harry yelled hopping to his feet.

"It's your fault!" Lora yelled back, standing up and leaning forward enough to press him into understanding through intimidation. It worked, at least a little, as he backed down and stared at her in confusion. "Look. As long as you're both around each other, your bonds will continue to grow. You're both predispositioned to fall for one another."

"What?" Harry asked, shocked. "But, I haven't felt any-"

"Haven't you?" Lora asked, staring into his eyes. "And think before you answer me!"

Harry flinched, but did as he was told. For some reason, he found himself unable to pull his eyes away from Lora's and he could hear her accusing voice in his head.

'You enjoy cuddling with her.'

'She's my friend and she feels safer and more secure when she's being cuddled!'

'But you miss it when you aren't and you always enjoy it, just like you do with Hermione. You've been inviting her to your bed.'

'It was safer for her than her own and she's been feeling guilty over Hermione and preferred not being alone!'

'But you know it isn't proper or right. You like having her in the bed. You miss her when she isn't, just as you miss spending time in bed with Hermione from the hunt. You always take action to ensure you give her hugs whenever you meet or she comes near you.'

'It ... helps her feel like I care,' Harry thought, beginning to be unsure of himself.

'You were falling for her in fifth year before being pushed towards Cho.' Harry paled. As a matter of fact, even while he pursued Cho, he had felt drawn to the doe-eyed blonde, going to her to talk after DA meetings and spending time with her whenever he didn't have that damned nervous twitch about being around someone that others ostracized more than himself. 'Oh shit.'

"Yes," Lora said with a vindictive smile. "You understand now?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "I wouldn't betray Hermione, no matter how I felt about another girl."

"This isn't about you!" Lora yelled again. "This time, it's about Luna! This time, it's to save her life!"

"How?" Harry asked loudly. "Just what am I supposed to do?"

Lora took a deep breath and then let it out. "You have to stop being her friend."

"Like hell!" Harry yelled, barely refraining from punching his Death Angel square in her pixie nose.

"If you don't, she will get reckless in battle and get herself killed!" Lora yelled, furious at this stupid man for not being willing to give up his snuggle partner. "There's nothing you can do to stop that!"

"I don't care what you say, I don't believe it!" Harry yelled, getting into Lora's face. "Luna is my friend and I swore I'd always remain that friend! If you think I'm going to give that up just so she can be crushed, you're even battier than Dumbledore!"

"It would be kinder on her to break it off now than after she's actually fallen in love with you!" Lora seethed. "Can't you see I'm working towards her happiness!"

"All I see is you trying to break her spirit!" Harry seethed right back. "I won't stop being her friend just because you tell me she's going to get herself killed! I'll stop that if I have to! I won't let her into the fighting!"

"You couldn't stop her!" Lora screeched, throwing her hands up. "She won't let you fight without her any more than Hermione would!"

"Then I'll come up with something," Harry growled, turning and leaving the Room of Requirement and his Death Angel behind.

Lora yelled out and went back to her office, only to find herself in front of The One. Wide-eyed and more than a little terrified, she immediately bowed. It would seem he brought her here rather than allow her to go back to her planned destination.

"Your work has pleased me, Lora," the deep voice said, its timbre causing a shiver to run through her body.

"I ... I don't understand..." Lora shook as she tried to figure out what could have possibly gone right. As far as she was aware, everything was failing miserably. "I di-did as you asked and relayed ... er ... the severity of the situation to my charge, but ... he didn't do as he was told."

"And well he shouldn't have," the voice rumbled in amusement.

"I really, really don't understand," Lora quaked, beginning to feel like she was going to hyperventilate. This was the same all-powerful entity that had just finished explaining to her how horrible things now were and voicing his considerable displeasure towards her.

"The shift in the Balance was unfortunate," the voice said, the vibrations causing Lora to calm down just a little. "But the rest is going according to plan."

"P-plan?" Lora asked, now so far beyond confusion she felt she would give a repeat performance of the Chang girl in Luna's illusion.

"You may watch in the Spheros, Lora. Look at what you have wrought upon Harry Potter."

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] – (1) – That was my biggest peeve about soul mates; how a single kiss caused them to bond together without any work or pre-existing relationship. If my view on soul mates (FOR THIS STORY) is not clear, let me know in a review and I will just write an author's note detailing it specifically.

First, my plot hole. My original plan had Luna as a possible soul mate from the very beginning. Everything Lora told Harry was there from the beginning as a bonding experience between all three to solidify a form of friendship with them. To be blunt, my plot hole was the fact that I wasn't sure how to emotionally heal Luna if she was spending so much time with Harry compared to anyone else and since she won't spend much time with anyone I would consider a potential partner for her (I'm not a fan of Ron/Luna.) The plot is the same, the only difference is that Luna is actually a part of the relationship and it will allow for some deeper and meaningful conversations about the relationships as a whole. That, and kissing on lips instead of cheeks and lack of Luna-love with a different guy. There is not going to be any sex in this story, so it is just affection and such. The worse I'm willing to go on this one is skimpy swim outfits and exploration (in relation to naughty activities.)

My plot hole wasn't so much a hole, as the realization that my plans for how Harry rectified what Lora told him and the whole friendship. I had a couple of plans:

One, Harry ignores it and goes forward, trying to be there for Luna and make all the effort he can/knows how to keep her from doing something regrettable.

Two, he tries to set Luna up with someone before she gets too close to him (probably Neville, but I wanted Neville with Susan in this for future reasons) so it ends the whole problem from the get-go, but that doesn't work for how I'm writing the development and explaining the psychological aspects of everything.

Third, what I've done, which is he asks Hermione's opinion and for help, which leads to the combined relationship.

Lastly, not bring this up in the story at all so I had nothing to fix with Luna in the first place, but then I lose a lot of character growth that happens because of her and lose a profound way of showing what Harry's new mindset and determination does for him. But I'll be honest, I didn't fight with myself about keeping it purely Harmony since I want to eventually become the Lunar Harmony authority.



## Chapter13 – In Over Your Headmaster

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus

Rating: M

Warnings: Brief mention of torture, Adult Language, Adult Situations, Suggestive imagery

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parsletongue§

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] - Butterfly Effect– It has been said something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world. – Chaos Theory

This got to be rather long (21.548 words) and I chose to post rather than write the rest of it. This chapter only really covers about half the day. From breakfast to about two o'clock, but a lot happens.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality" by Less Wrong (H/Hr and a unique take on ... everything, really. Plus a fun plot)

xXx Previously xXx

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"You may watch in the Spheros, Lora. Look at what you have wrought upon Harry Potter."

xXx STORY xXx

Thanks to his little discussion and argument with Lora, Harry was still steaming by the time he finished his breakfast and only took enough time to talk just so he could calm Luna down when she noticed he was in a very bad mood and had begun to take it personally, thinking she had caused it. He felt a pang of guilt and took enough time to calm her down and tell her he just wasn't happy about having to go to the Ministry for something he had not been able to prepare for. It was even true, though not the primary reason for his frustrations. He even did his best to make sure he held a pleasant conversation with her until he wasn't hungry any longer.

Well, to be fair, he didn't really have much of an appetite since talking with his Death Angel. He spent most of the time observing Luna and wondering how in the hell he was going to keep her safe without hurting her.

Finally after finishing his breakfast, he went up to the Head Table, where McGonagall was eating. "Due to Lordship duties, I'll be leaving Hogwarts today within the next few minutes, Professor. If there's a change in Hermione, will you notify me?"

"Mister Potter, the Headmaster assured me that you wouldn't be needing to leave-"

"It is neither the Headmaster's place or his authority to tell you what I will or will not be doing," Harry bit out, harsher than he probably would have if not already in a horrible mood; not to mention how Dumbledore had no right to discuss Harry's duties with anyone but Harry himself. He ignored Madam Sprout's venomous glare and turned around, leaving the Hall with furious visage that had students

quiet and trying not to move in case they drew his attention towards themselves.

"How could you allow a student to speak to you like that, Minerva?" The Head of Hufflepuff asked quietly, making sure no one else heard her. "He may normally be a good child, but that was quite disrespectful!"

"Because he was right, even if he was ill-tempered about it," Minerva sighed. "I honestly don't know why I listen to that man anymore."

Sprout's hearing wasn't anything on Remus Lupin's, but it was enough to hear, and wonder, at Minerva's self-loathing comment. 'Perhaps it's time for a girl's night. Good talks and good booze. I'll have to dig up my good stuff.' Sprout would never tell anyone, but she had a taste for expensive and mind-numbing beverages. She didn't care to weaken her mind with it all the time, but she did enjoy a good dip in the sauce on occasion. And it seemed one of her best friends could use the reprieve.

Of course, she'd have to figure out how to get it away from her plants, who had found that they enjoyed it, too. How else was the woman meant to work with such deadly plants? Make 'em damn friendly! That's how! It worked for men in bars all the time! Of course, the women didn't tend to be nearly as happy about it the next day, but then again, neither did the plants.

xXxXxXx

Since it was still early in the day, only half past seven, Harry's first stop was Gringotts. He knew the Wizengamot session wasn't planned until one that afternoon. By and large, wizards didn't do much in early morning unless they were tradesmen who knew an open business was one that made money since families got up early enough to do things that required shopping. But for a bunch of men who had a tendency to do nothing but sit in a stale chamber and pass laws for something to do to feel important, getting up this early was almost sacrilegious. So, Harry took his time effectively and did what would be too bothersome later.

"These are the files we've been able to gather," Griphook told Harry after the boy had obtained everything he needed from the vaults that

belonged to the Founders, "about the duties the Ministry for Magic and the Board of Governors. It lists the details of their duties in relation to one another in the absence of the Founders' blood."

"Can you give me a basic explanation?" Harry asked.

"By and large," Griphook began, "the Board was meant to control the policies and quality of education. It was meant to ensure meaningful topics would remain such as your Transfiguration and Charms classes, along with keeping them all up-to-date. The Ministry would work through this body to enforce its hand while maintaining only one direct arm in the school itself."

"A 'direct arm'? How so?" Harry asked.

"In a moment, Lord Potter. I will explain that. First, Hogwarts itself," Griphook explained. "Hogwarts is a vast amount of land, by anyone's standards. It encompasses the school and its grounds, Hogsmeade, the Forbidden Forest, the sea coast, and another hundred kilometers in all directions meant for farming, expansion and to act as a buffer against non-magical interaction. Do you follow me so far?"

"I do," Harry stated.

"Good. Now, because of this, and because there was no singular ruling body at the time for the magical world, the school was not a part of the Ministry for Magic in any way. The Ministry at the time was little more than a collection of scholars and battle mages who fought for the peace of the land."

"Really?" Harry asked. "I've not heard of that."

"It has changed drastically from its founding ideals and practices," Griphook grumbled angrily. "We can discuss that at another time if you would like. For now, however, I think it prudent to stay on task, yes?"

"You're right. Please, continue," Harry said.

"Since Hogwarts was not under any direct ruling authority, it, like many vast estates by those considered 'Lords', was basically a realm upon itself."

"I don't understand," Harry admitted, somewhat confused. "What do you mean 'a realm upon itself'?"

"Lord Potter, you are a lord(1). You do realize what that means, do you not?" Griphook asked slowly and disbelieving. How could a Lord not know of his station? Not know of his power and his duties?

Harry questioned his rings and received several possible uses of the title, but nothing specific that would let him know what Griphook was talking about, though they did seem to be telling him of duties. Apparently, however, he didn't get the information fast enough for Griphook.

"Lord Potter, you are known as a lord because you have many who work and serve under you while maintaining right to rule over a portion of area that is self-sufficient. You hold office in our highest bodies of government and have vassals who till the fields for Hogwarts, serve as craftsmen within your village and own or share ownership in many businesses. The Cleansweep broom company, Natas' Trunk Shop, Potioneers and Bandoleers, the Daily Prophet and even a few preserves and mines where you allow magical creatures to breed are but a few of your more lucrative ownerships, even if the trunk shop is a new acquisition. You have partial ownerships in dozens of others, many of which are muggle. You've about a hundred human workers, most of which is comprised of various families and a few dozen house elves not counting Hogwarts' own. You are a lord."

"I what?" Harry asked. It wasn't a shriek of fear or alarm. It was bland and without feeling. He just simply did not know how to feel about that.

"Lord Potter, there are some such as the Malfoys who bought their titles. It has been done for centuries. With enough money, one could buy their ranks such as Lordships or Knighthoods, but they were titles only. It served them no power beyond the masses. Even in the Church, men would buy their way into priesthoods or to gain favor of their religion. This is something that is still done even to this day. However, the only place it matters is in public, where the common people are expected to bend over backwards to accommodate them or, in the case of those such as the Malfoys, in the political arena."

"You specified them twice," Harry noted. "Why?"

Griphook grinned ferally. "First, because they are the second-most recent family to have done so approximately four hundred years ago, give or take a dozen, and the youngest has been making a nuisance of himself against you, I am told. It is our duty to ensure we can best help our clients, and for that reason, it is my second reason for knowing who your allies and your friends are, along with your enemies. Your Granger friend, for example. You gave her full access to one of your vaults, filled with a substantial amount of gold. That is no small action and shows a great trust in the girl. We took note of that and made arrangements to ensure we could help, or deny help, at your command."

"How do you mean?" Harry asked in a voice that was suddenly cold and dangerous. Hermione had recently been hurt and there was nothing he could do to help her. She, as well as Luna, had wanted to wait to swear allegiance to him and so they were not officially his to protect. Luna had wanted to ask her father, knowing it was her place to not accept, but relay any such offers to her father who could make decisions first, though Luna would agree on her own, regardless. If even for only herself. Hermione, however, wanted to look into it fully before committing to a decision and then discuss it with her parents since they were, technically, at risk any time they walked into the wizarding world. Whether the intentions were good or not, Griphook was suddenly walking on very thin ice with Harry Potter.

Realizing there was suddenly a very powerful, very angry wizard in front of him, Griphook was very careful in his actions. He didn't fear too strongly that the boy would try something. After all, there was an agreement between wizards and goblins that made their bank their own land, with their own laws. However, this boy also didn't seem to be fully aware of such things, or may not care. That, along with making Griphook very wealthy, at least compared to his previous station, and much more well-respected, put the tiny goblin on guard. He would much rather keep making money and somehow knew this wizard could make it out of the bank, no matter how many of their people went after him. There was something about him that seemed otherworldly at times. His power levels, certainly, seemed so.

"Lord Potter, please remain calm. We have done nothing in action against Miss Granger or her family. What we are doing is actually helping them at no cost to ourselves in hopes of better being able to

help you in the future should you ask it of us. If not, then at the very least, we lose nothing and are in position to gain, so no one is hurt in our transactions."

"Explain," Harry clipped out using a voice more in line with his older self. One that Death Eaters were more familiar with. Griphook recognized it in his superiors.

"The elder Grangers own their own dental practice. They had even thought into the future and made a sound investment of buying a facility that was much larger than they needed and went into business with an optometrist and a psychologist in the adjoining facilities, thus enabling themselves to collect a portion of rent from those businesses in hopes of collaborating and helping join profits for all with some remarkable success. However, they had a lien against the property until it was paid off. In the past sixteen years, they had only paid off a quarter of the debt due to higher-than-normal interest. While they are extremely profitable due to their joint ventures and forethought, they were extremely hesitant, it seems, to renegotiate their rates and risk a bank the right to foreclose on the property since it would require renegotiating other aspects of the original deal that keeps them safe from economical fallout or shifts."

"I follow you so far," Harry said with narrowed eyes. "Basically, they owe someone money and are a quarter of the way into paying it off."

"Yes Lord Potter," Griphook confirmed. "However, with the birth of their daughter, and because they have taken to putting money away in case of the unforeseen or their early demise for her, they have taken to paying little more than their monthly rates. A sound strategy for remaining comfortable, but not conducive for repaying the debt in a timely manner. That is where we elected to come into things and position ourselves to assist if ever necessary."

"By paying it off if needed?" Harry asked, thinking he understood now and relaxing considerably.

"We have already done so, minus a good deal of the added interest for doing so early," Griphook explained. "The new debt is without interest and equal to that which we paid for the original lien. While maintaining their current rental amounts, they will have everything paid for in the following forty-eight years instead of the remaining sixty-one they had before our acquisition. If you ever require it of us,

we are now poised to erase their debt, or ruin them as you will ever require of us, for a suitable fee of course."

"Of course," Harry grouched. "How much did they owe on it still?"

"Approximately one and three-quarters of a million pounds."

"What! Why so much? Is this place huge or something?" Harry asked, shocked.

"No, Lord Potter. It is a business building in a very upper-class location that provides them numerous clients, which has a tendency to cost more than a living residence would. This is normal in all countries. At least on the muggle side of things. In the magical, it's a little different due to the ability to modify the indoor size of a location and travel ability."

Harry shook his head. "Right now, Gringotts actually owns it?" Harry asked, referencing the building the Grangers had.

"Correct."

"Take enough gold to get to two million pounds and then buy it from Gringotts for me, please. I'd feel better if I knew there was no risk of anyone else getting it from you since it can apparently be purchased from one person to another. Just add it to my businesses. I really need to look through that some time."

"I would highly recommend it," Griphook chided in the guise of agreement. "You own several buildings within Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley, apparently collected during the last war about fifteen to twenty years ago. I followed up only long enough to ensure rents have been properly collected these past several years, which they have." A pity, too, since Gringotts would have enjoyed renting them out at higher rates. While most were small or in poor locations, some were quite prime for a proper store.

Harry sighed and pinched the bridge of his brow. Things just weren't ever going to be easy. "So, I've got people who work for me?"

"Yes, Lord Potter," Griphook confirmed. "A large number, in fact. A large portion of land in many areas is used for farming, mostly for Hogwarts and magical storage to withstand long-term sieges and



poor growth years. They're standing orders since the beginning. While you don't have a tendency to deal with sieges much anymore, there are times when crops will not grow or something happens which will ruin them. Still, due to the magical enchantments, they'll keep for centuries, as some of it has."

"And that's what makes me a lord?"

"Not only, but a good portion of the reasoning, yes. You are a true lord. Not someone who has purchased the title. And, getting back on topic, that is why Hogwarts is not a part of the Ministry's control scheme."

"Sorry for interrupting," Harry said, sitting back. "I'll listen to you explain now."

Griphook nodded. "You control your land, just as you do Hogwarts and those living on your properties. Even your vassals work for a salary and food for their family while tilling the rest for you. In return, you care for their basic needs and it is your duty to offer them a form of protection. Therefore, Hogwarts, and any lands you have wherein someone is living and you take care of them, are considered separate entities from our ruling government, but still within their control in some ways. Hogwarts, however, has the most direct."

Griphook pulled a scroll and slid it to Harry. "That, Lord Potter, is an edict that gives the Ministry the right to put their own forces within Hogwarts as something of a system of checks and balances. The position is called that of a 'High Inquisitor'," Griphook raised one gnarled eyebrow as the boy in front of him suddenly became almost frighteningly attentive and began reading the scroll. "Basically, any time there is a threat, fear of a threat or they simply want to look into the school, they activate this position and assign someone the task of making sure no laws are being broken that all within the land are bound to under the Peaceful Lands Treatise that the battle mages of the original Ministry created."

Harry interrogated his rings fiercely, filling himself in on what exactly that meant. "Let me know if I'm correct, please," he began. "Basically, they are to check to make sure people are not being murdered, unforgivables used, things like that?"

"Yes and no," Griphook explained. Sort of. "Murders, rapes, torture, theft and other such things come in levels of importance based on the victim or victims according to the Tenements of Morality, meaning it depends much on 'who' instead of the 'what'. Unforgivables are deemed not allowed anywhere. That is true. However, the Treaty actually ensures that you are not creating an army of any sort," Harry mentally winced, "attempting to incite sedition," Harry also winced, even though technically he had been in the right, "or in any way showing signs of an attempt to overthrow the government directly unless it directly relates to your own business and is not directly related to the government as a whole. Other than that, and those amendments that are considered crimes against humanity, as defined by the Tenements of Morality, you have full authority within your lands."

Harry nodded, understanding the difference now. He hadn't understood what his rings were telling him, but that was effectively the same message. Apparently, the rings didn't take into account lack of comprehension when giving what he asked. Some things, it seemed, were meant to be understood as basic knowledge. Which made sense, really, when you considered that the rings weren't meant for children, but for those who were taught politics so they could duke it out legally without the edge the rings brought. "So basically, the Ministry can't touch me as long as I'm not actively working against them?"

"In a word, no," Griphook said. "However, they can always twist facts to look one way or another. And there are still the Tenements of Morality, or simply put, how one treats humans, that you must generally follow. However, that was created long ago when non-magical and muggleborn were not considered to have a status as human. While the focus has shifted, muggleborn have always had a rough time in the magical world. It originally had nothing to do with blood so much as upbringing and social status. That may, effectively, be all that it remains today, but the focus has shifted to purity of blood now. Because of that, many who are in power see muggleborn or halfblood as little more than human and usually look the other way. It is almost a guarantee with half-breeds, and truly is a guarantee with non-human beings. Muggleborn are only defended when called upon by someone of equal or lesser station than themselves. Non-magicals tend to be ignored and, if possible, their minds simply wiped of whatever problem arose as completely as

required and then tossed back into the muggle world. Muggleborn aren't much better."

Griphook normally wouldn't discuss topics like this. No goblin would, particularly because they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the wizarding world; a fact that every single member of his species both resented and despised. But he knew where this human lay on the matter and was under orders from his king to ensure the boy got whatever assistance he needed. While this didn't fall into the latter category, the knowledge base did.

"Okay. I know what I need to there," Harry said, closing up the scroll he had been given. "What about the Board of Governors?"

"As stated earlier, they are meant to ensure the quality of education at Hogwarts and the Ministry is meant to work through them. They have the ability to control staff and faculty within a certain degree and are the ones who would implement any Ministerial decrees or educational plans. They are meant to ensure the school stays up-to-date with others and remain at its height of power and remain as best as possible," Griphook reexplained.

"Fat lot of good that does," Harry grunted. "A lot of things are out of date and much of it skewed."

"I am not aware," Griphook said, hedging a little nugget of knowledge towards Harry in hopes it would help somehow ingratiate the boy to him. "From what I understand, the purebloods have been lowering standards and removing some things they found all together too difficult or impractical to their own uses such as introductory classes to the wizarding world, etiquette classes and general standards due to inability to keep up with muggleborn who are knowledgeable in a greater area at younger ages as the years have passed."

Harry shrugged helplessly. "Well, what about those Arches? What have you decided on about that?" Harry asked, deciding he knew as much about Hogwarts as he could for now. They had been talking for nearly an hour and he was hoping to do some other things before the day was out. Still, he needed to look into that Tenements of Morality thing since that seemed almost directly related to blood status and current law. And while his rings basically told him what it

was, it was a little hard to understand being told rather than reading since it seemed mildly complex.

"We've looked into what you suggested for them, but it was impractical for what you wanted. We have come up with something somewhat unique that we think may work for your purposes, however."

"I'm listening," Harry said, intrigued by the small goblin's tone.

"We decided, instead, upon a runic keystone tied directly to each arch with several seals that are to be activated in sequence. If you will, think of a muggle telephone. Basically, they dial the portal they wish to cross through."

"I like it," Harry said, thinking. "But, what about the security bit? I mean, if someone sees a person dial my home, for example, what keeps them from just dialing it themselves? A big part of this is in case of something horrible happening, and those families needing to run away, they can get through, but not the bad guys."

Griphook handed Harry a small pedestal from his desk drawer before resizing it to a larger size. "As you can see, the runic keys are in three circular levels around a single black crystal. These crystals are unique and generally found only in volcanoes where the heat is exceptional, but the magma doesn't actually reach, forming geodes. It's uncommon to find specimens this large, but they do show up."

"Is that a big deal? That it has to be that kind, I mean?" Harry asked, touching the crystal and feeling a warm vibration, as if it were humming with power. Only he didn't actually sense anything from it.

"For some, yes," Griphook explained. "They are the entire key to making your security system work."

"I don't understand," Harry admitted. "I've only just begun learning about crystals. How does it help?"

"These crystals are, for lack of a better description, physical magic," Griphook began, somewhat amused at the human's widened eyes. "They are physically only crystal, that is true, but during their formation, they are shaped by the very energy of the earth, which is

a form of life energy, which is the same as the power one gets from blood magics."

"So, it basically has the same kind of power that blood does? Even without being magical?" Harry asked, remembering his Runes class where blood was the best substance for writing runes and seals in, but was considered dark because it actually required blood. Interestingly enough, his rings felt reticent to offer any explanation.

"Blood magic is considered dark by your people, Lord Potter, because it uses the energy of life itself instead of magic. If they chose to, even muggles could cast some of your most powerful spells using runes if they were aware of how to utilize it," Griphook explained lowly. He, and virtually all magical creatures, disliked the obvious hubris of mankind. "Your Ministry loathes to admit that fact and thus has declared all blood magic as dark, even though many still use it due to the power it entails where magic would be lacking."

"Lacking how?" Harry asked, extraordinarily interested. This was something he had a brief anecdote about in his grimoire, but had not actually read or received any information about.

"As an example, if you were to use a ritual to strengthen your body against fatigue, you could write it in standard runic inks, but if you wrote it in blood, it would yield several times more powerful a result because the power of life is greater than that of magic. A thing is either dead or it is not. Muggles are alive, but without magic. And magic flees a body without life. They are interconnected in a way that magic alone cannot be. Magic cannot exist where there is no life in some form. Even inferi are incapable of using magic, but they are made of it, animated like a flesh golem. Non-humans consider death as an anti-life and anti-magic. Dementors, for example, take the life of humans, and the magic leaves with them. All that remains is a body that continues the motions of life without living. Simply put, there is not magic without life."

"I feel like I've learned more about magic in the last ten minutes than in two years at Hogwarts," Harry said, thinking over what he heard. This somehow seemed ... important. In a very big way.

"This is all considered philosophical to your human teachings," Griphook explained. "We other races believe it as fact without doubt. Only mankind has elected to form a body of power that attempts to

control all magical races and beings, to say nothing of the magics themselves it either attempts to control or destroy. All but humans consider magic the ultimate authority. Yet humans, by and large, attempt to control and regulate it, instead. Still, your race seems to know enough to respect bonds forged of magic over that of man-made law and contract."

Harry frowned and looked down at the crystal, not sure how to respond to that. So instead, he chose to ignore it for now since he had no way to combat the accusation of his own race since, technically, it was true. At least as far as he knew. "So, how does this help my security?" He asked instead.

"The crystal can be put through a ritual of blood by which you gain control over it and may grant or revoke traveling permissions and pass on the right to control it. It would function with a mild form of sentience as your family rings do, or the magical paintings you have at Hogwarts. While it won't have a personality, it will be able to comprehend by imprinting a working mind into it. It, therefore, is your 'key'. If destroyed, it would remove those securities, or if the magics were lost, but that would only happen due to sabotage or deliberate obliteration."

"So, I need blood from anyone I want to give access to?" Harry asked, wondering how to bring that up into a conversation with Hermione's parents.

"No, Lord Potter," Griphook explained. "It would be a ritual with your blood to bind it to an imprint of your logical mind. Then, you may grant access rights at any time, or revoke them, without needing to be present. We felt this method would be far more expedient in the case of needing to grant access to someone and not having time to gather genetic samples to key in, or magical signatures. There is, however, one flaw in this security system."

"What's that?" Harry asked. So far, it had sounded beyond perfect. It suddenly made sense that it was too good to be true.

"This crystal acknowledges access rights by a mild form of mind-reading magic, much like the hat you humans use to sort yourselves in Hogwarts. Basically, it asks the mind who the traveler is. If they are allowed, then it grants them passage. However, if they are not, it will not. The problem, such as it is, comes in sending through

individuals who could potentially be magicked into truly believing themselves to be someone else. If they believe it fully enough, then so long as that person they believe themselves to be is allowed passage, the security system will grant it."

"So, if Lucius Malfoy was confounded to think he was Ron Weasley, and believed it, he could get through if Ron was allowed to come in?" Harry asked to clarify.

"A simple confundus would not work, but essentially correct," Griphook confirmed. "No security system is perfect, but this leads to the least-likely methods of bypassing the system since to change their minds fully enough, it would essentially mean changing who they are, which is not a temporary thing. Genetics can be faked or stolen. Wearable keys that allow entrance can be lost or stolen, or even duplicated. A password can be tortured out of someone, or magicked out of them. While magical signatures can be used, they can also be faked and you specifically stated you wanted muggles to be capable of traversing these gate systems. As such, a magical signature is pointless to them."

"I understand. No system is perfect. I mean, the Fidelus is near perfect, but the secret-keeper can always give out the information. It's all about trust. The only way, from what it sounds like, someone can do anything is if they break the crystal and as long as they don't know that, then they'll spend their time trying to figure out the security at the arch they'll be using. At least that's what I hope," Harry explained. He was hoping for perfect, but near-perfect would have to do(2).

"Does the crystal have to be this large? You said it's uncommon for them to be this big?" Harry asked, looking to get back on track. Indeed, the crystal was about as large as his head.

"No. However, the larger the crystal, the more naturally resistant to damage or destruction it is. Ones these size cannot be destroyed using any known physical means, but would require magic itself, although far less than we would desire normally. They have been tested in various forms, and even giants are incapable of the force required for physical destruction. Another element of our security. We are aware of muggle creations that could accomplish the task, but do not feel it is a fear worth merit as they are large and require their electrical sources to function." Or high explosives, but that

would defeat the purpose since anything like that would likely get their client as well. No sense making the boy worry.

"If they're uncommon, how many could you have made up for me?"

Griphook blinked. "How many would you require, Lord Potter?"

Harry paused to think. 'Well, I want one for Potter Manor, one for my trunk ... actually, I don't really need the trunk anymore. Not with a house. Even on the run, we'd have Hermione's. I guess I'll give it to Luna for Christmas. So, Manor, Hermione's trunk, Granger home, Burrow, Luna's home, Neville, Susan! Have to get one for Susan so her aunt has an escape route and doesn't get killed again!' Harry pondered, trying to determine where he wanted and needed these things for now. "I'd like seven for now with more to come later, for sure," he finally decided.

"We will need to know where these will go," Griphook explained while dipping a gnarled piece of root into ink to write with, not using quills for their own work like the humans did.

"One will be for Hermione Granger's home and the other would be portable in a trunk I got her for Christmas. It's built like an apartment. Will that be a problem for these?"

"No, Lord Potter. Continue," Griphook said, writing.

"Third for a similar trunk for Luna Lovegood and the fourth for her home. Fifth would be my home. Sixth is Hogwarts. The last one will go to the Weasley family's home. I'll eventually want one here at Gringotts if that's allowed in case I can't go out in public for some reason, and one for Amelia Bones' home and a few friends I want to be safe."

"Additions can be made at a later time, Lord Potter," Griphook stated, finishing his notes and making a request to go to his superiors in regards to adding one for public use at a later time, possibly charging for each use for their wealthier clients rather than general use. "Once we decide on the most secure method of identifying each Archway, we will let you know. Our people are currently working on various methods to determine the best course for everyone. Naturally, our systems will be different than your own and kept within the bank."



"Thank you," Harry said, once Griphook was done. "Now, what about my request for the enchanted charms?"

"You are sure you wish to go forward with your request?" Griphook asked carefully. "As stated in the letter, we do not do bulk discounts, nor do we do refunds. Once the transaction is complete, there is no return."

"I'm aware," Harry agreed.

"Very well," Griphook said pleasantly, grabbing his notes and reading aloud for Harry to confirm. "You want a charm bracelet, necklace, anklet and earring set for two whose charms are interchangeable, correct?"

"Yes," Harry said with a nod.

"Please confirm your theme selections," Griphook demanded, sliding the scroll over.

Animals: Cat, Lion, Eagle, Swan, Sphinx, Griffin, Otter, Unicorn, Dragon, Duck, Rabbit, Lemur, Dog, Tiger, Stag, Panther, Hippogriff, Penguin, Cerberus, Wolf, Frog, Dragonfly, Butterfly, Mouse, House Elf, Kiwi

Holiday: Christmas tree, Star, Candy cane, present box, sugarplum, Santa, Elf, Sleigh, Snowflake, Jack-o-Lantern, Ghost, Witch, Broomstick, Candlestick, Zombie (Inferi), Heart, Cupid, Lips

Food: Radish, Pie, Bowl of Pudding (Please have Mister Potter explain this), Pizza slice, Pineapple, Cherry, Banana, Coconut

Miscellaneous: Wand, Shield, Angel, Book, Snitch, Scroll, Flame, Globe, Sock, Shoe, Tree, Fairy, Eye, Rose, Lily, Sunflower, Ice-cream Sundae, Smiley face, Butterbeer cork, Butterbeer bottle

"It looks about right," Harry said. "I may want to add a few later, but that's good for now at least."

"Then we will craft these in silver, charmed to ensure they do not tarnish. Each charm will be interchangeable with a locking mechanism so they do not fall out and they will be capable of

wearing three on either the anklet or bracelet, five on the necklace and one on each earring. Each will be a circular coin-like attachment that is placed into each setting. That is what you requested, correct?"

"Yes," Harry said happily. "And you'll make them protect them from as much as possible?" Harry asked.

"Our guardian enchantments are not usually placed on things like this. Usually, it is on a single item meant to be worn around the neck or on a ring."

Harry perked up, causing Griphook to shake his head. "We do not recommend rings, Lord Potter. They are good for things such as engagement and wedding rings, since those are rarely removed, but anything else tends to generally be wasted. That is why we only guarantee them while worn as intended, which is actually why we are glad to craft so many ... odd additions." That and each one was plenty of gold.

"Alright," Harry grumbled. "Last question, how difficult would it be for someone to tutor me over the summer in breaking wards?"

"I wouldn't dream of casting aspirations towards your intelligence, Lord Potter," Griphook stated carefully.

"No," Harry frowned. "I mean, how difficult would it be to find a tutor?"

"For the right price, one could be found without much difficulty. However, you will find that almost none who are any good will wish to work with you. It is not a matter of pride or the like, but that you do not yet know enough to make it worth their time. They could teach you little to nothing in only a few months' time and they know this. More, they would not wish to begin you on something that is likely to be dangerous with your current knowledge base. We at Gringotts would be willing to provide a tutor for you, but they would not begin teaching you about breaking wards until after they had taught you everything from the ground up. In other words, there are no shortcuts."

In all honesty, that is not what Harry had expected to hear. For some reason, he thought it wouldn't be too hard to get one. He hated his fame, but maybe he was relying on it too much?

"I believe that concludes all business you shared that you wish to discuss. Have you anything further, Lord Potter?"

"Just one last thing," Harry said. "So, there is no real way they can stop me from taking control back over Hogwarts and putting through reforms to make it a better place?"

"Not without proving you are not an heir of all four bloodlines, which has already been magically proven by the rings which you wear. They will, of course, fight it, but there is nothing they can do. That is why the Ministry is so set on hiding all knowledge of their only partial hold over the castle and why it cost you so much gold to get that information."

"Final question, I promise," Harry said, getting a frown from the goblin who wondered why Harry kept thinking of new things. "Do you think I can have at least three of these arches ready to be delivered by the end of the month?"

"I will see what can be done, Lord Potter."

"Thank you, Griphook. I think that's everything."

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Sirius sighed in his dog form, laying down atop a series of crates he had stacked while in his human form several nights ago. He was behind the Three Broomsticks building and by the window leading into Madam Rosemerta's bathing room because she took only scalding hot showers, meaning hot air came from the window, warming him up from the early morning chill.

And giving him a bird's eye view into the well-endowed woman's shower.

If you were in prison for twelve years, a prison where thoughts like this were plucked out of your head before you even thought them, you would be doing the exact same thing. One couldn't blame the

dog for ... well, being a bit of a hound. At least he wasn't 'cleaning' himself this time.

No. Even while Madam Rosemerta lathered herself up, Sirius wasn't really paying much attention. His mind, such as it was, was currently focused instead on a different topic than the naked woman's swaying assets. They were instead on his godson and the traitor, sleeping only a dozen or so feet away from him.

Sirius knew he had been able to get into the school at any time. He knew ways into that school that even Dumbledore didn't know. Or if he did, he obviously didn't bother taking precautions against Sirius' passage. He had been biding his time in hopes that the boy with the rat would go into Hogsmeade for their first weekend. While Sirius was able to smell the rat on the boy, it was too faint to have the rat on him then. So he had not been able to act.

But then the fates smiled upon him in the form of a bumbling Gryffindor with passwords sticking out of his pocket! They were even labeled! The man in dog form had managed to pull the paper out and bury it under the dirt and gravel when his stomach churned, alerting the dog to his state of hunger and near starvation. With a single butterbeer right in front of him, he hadn't been able to resist. It had been more than twelve years since Sirius had anything other than water, or worse, and the bottle was already opened. Begging to be drunk.

Oh sweet ambrosia! It had been the best thing Sirius could remember for a long, long time. At least better than the rats he had been surviving on since his escape. There weren't any rats on Azkaban island. He was forced to eat the slop he was served once a day, occasionally every two days. Whatever it was, it had been just as gray and green as the walls of the prison, leaving Sirius to suspect they scraped it off the towers on the outside. Considering one couldn't get a house elf to work there, it wasn't entirely impossible.

Oddly enough, he had seen his godson that day. The boy, who was far too much like James for Sirius to believe, had forced him to bathe and then fed him what was easily his best meal in a long, long time. It was actually kind of odd. Harry had met Sirius twice now, seemingly by happenstance, and had fed him both times.

Sirius was seriously considering staying in dog form as the boy's pet!

'That bird with him was certainly interesting,' Sirius thought to himself, yipping quietly in amusement. 'Third year and he's already got a girl on his arm! James would be so proud! Lily would be furious, but still. And they both smelled far too strongly of yet another girl for them to not be romantically inclined together. They were literally covered in her scent! Something odd that reminds me of banana pudding...'

What was probably the most incredible, at least in Sirius' opinion that wasn't related to bouncing bits or being able to remember what pudding smelled like, was that the boy was capable of casting a fully corporeal patronus. What Sirius wouldn't give to be able to do that! If only he had a wand...

It would have been so simple to just take off with one, pretending to want to play fetch and running about with it...

But no. That would only cause trouble and would be too suspicious. He couldn't do anything that overt until he could make a play for the rat. 'Everything else is secondary. The rat must die. First and foremost, James and Lily must be avenged!'

Growling and being filled with a renewed sense of purpose, Sirius took one last, long look at Madam Rosemerta. 'If I were a free man...'

Quickly, the black dog ran off to his cave, resting and planning for his next assault. After cleaning himself of course.

It was twelve years...

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"Face it, brother mine. We have been out-pranked," Fred said with a sigh. "A school-wide food assault-"

"-Dying agents in the showers-"

"-Laxatives in chocolates-"

"-Itching powder and cayenne pepper in the Slytherin bog rolls-

"-Fake spiders in Ron's bed. All of it and we haven't had one big prank yet. These are pranks against the whole school and we didn't pull off a single one of them."

George sighed, sitting on a chair in their 'lair', as they affectionately called the spacious crawl space behind a suit of armor that originally housed a rather large number of naughty witch magazines that the two had long-since copied and sold off. Oddly enough, new ones kept appearing and they eventually realized it was a storage area for such offensive materials after confiscation. The big question was wondering who had been caught with the ones that were naughty wizards. "I'm aware, Fred. It's certainly not right. We've our honor to uphold, you know."

Fred nodded. "I do question some of them. Come to find out, those balls of paint are rather painful when getting hit with them."

"We need to think of something suitably embarrassing," George considered out loud.

"We can't just do something against all the houses," Fred offered. "It's been done and if we're honest, we don't want to be seen imitating anyone now."

"School wide assault. Difficulty rating?" George asked.

"Eight," Fred answered immediately. "Large number of variables, targets and extensive planning required with near certainty of being caught. Faculty-wide assault. Difficulty rating?"

George grinned. "Nine. Ten if we snag both Snape and Dumbledore. Guarantee of being caught, but infamy rating rises."

"It's our honor as pranksters at stake. We can't afford to pull any punches. For the pride of the Marauders and the great legacy they've left us." Both miscreants nodded resolutely. The students, this time, were safe.

Probably.

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"Thank you all for coming," Dumbledore said as the final member of the staff sat at the antechamber of the Great Hall. While it was easily accessible most of the time, it was actually one of the most secure rooms of the school. It was actually a secondary meeting room to the Headmaster's offices, though it hadn't been used as such in nearly two hundred years. For now, it was used mostly for staff meetings like this one where they would deliberate while they ate. "I am aware many of you have busy schedules even if it is our lunch hour."

"Why did you want our staff meeting early?" Madam Hooch asked the headmaster, her golden eyes following the plate of chicken on its way towards her.

"I did, actually," Sprout explained, acknowledging the looks everyone sent her way. "The Headmaster saw fit to honor my request. I am deeply disturbed by the events that transpired a week ago. Miss Granger was brutally attacked after stepping forward to block an unknown spell cast by Miss Chang towards Miss Lovegood. The next morning, Miss Clearwater found Chang and her two cohorts in crime while making her rounds and it was discovered they were attacked and as a result, their minds shattered."

"We're all aware of Miss Granger's foolish actions and the subsequent retaliation," Snape murmured, sipping his coffee.

"And we're also all aware not a single thing has been done about either event," Madam Sprout snapped angrily. "They aren't my Hufflepuffs, but shouldn't someone be attempting to find out what happened? Regardless of their guilt, we cannot have vigilantes running amok in the school!"

"The matter isn't as simple as that," Dumbledore spoke into the burgeoning argument, hoping to sooth ruffled feathers. Or scales and fur, as the case was.

"Why not?" Professor Babbling asked, more than just a little belligerently. She had grown more than just a little fond of Hermione Granger and Harry Potter. Harry was perhaps the most devoted student she had ever had or had ever seen. His essays were things that made her breathing quicken and her pulse thunder in her ears.

Hermione wasn't much different, though she was certainly more academic in her essays than Harry's practical use essays.

"The law still sees muggleborns as little to no concern," Albus explains in long-suffering tones. "From a legal standpoint, there is little that can really be accomplished in regards to Miss Granger's attack."

"Her assault, you mean," Bathsheba grunted. "Don't make it sound as though Miss Granger was in the wrong here. She protected another student and was severely hurt because of it. If Mister Potter hadn't an ironclad alibi, I'd be walking carefully around him after what happened to Chang and her misfits."

"There's also something to be asked about the attack on them, as well," Filius stated from down near the other end of the table, getting near-incredulous looks. "I am not saying that they didn't deserve to have some form of punishment, and severe at that, but in Pomona's words, we cannot have vigilantes running about, enforcing their will in the school."

"Why haven't you been speaking up or looking into matters, Minerva?" Bathsheba asked, looking at Hermione's Head of House. "You seem to be taking Miss Granger's assault in stride."

"How dare you!" Minerva hissed, sounding something like her animagus form. One could almost see her wanting to arch her back. "We know who did this to her and now I've no one to punish! What would you have me do? Floo Miss Chang's father and demand a counter curse? Poppy already did so!"

"Enough, you two," Albus said, sighing again. "Bickering will get us nowhere. Now, as to Miss Granger's attackers, we know who they were and they have since been disposed of. There is little we can do there until they regain consciousness. While we all have our own suspicions as to who has attacked them, there is no evidence. No magic was cast at them that any of our scans could trace. It is as if they merely saw something their minds could not comprehend."

"I've more than enough veritaserum that we could-"



"Severus!" Scolded Minerva, still furious and not ready to take any crap. "One more illegal suggestion and we'll see just how far Albus is willing to go to protect your slimy arse!"

Pomona Sprout couldn't quite understand why that made her feel warm and fuzzy inside.

Of course, neither could Snape.

"That is enough," Albus said more forcefully. "The point is, we cannot prove who has done any of this and, as such, cannot take proper action. Nor can we go about and question students. They need only lie and say they did not commit the crime. Does this satisfy you, Pomona?" Dumbledore asked, hoping she had been appeased by bringing the situation up where no one could ignore it any longer. Honestly, this wasn't much worse than Slytherins or Cho and her motley crew got away with fairly often. The only difference between that, this and even some of what had been happening to Luna Lovegood was that this time, someone actually cared enough about the victim to speak up who didn't fear retribution.

"No, actually," Pomona said with a glare. "While it was discussed, it is nothing more than saying, 'too bad, so sorry, we don't know who did it so we will just ignore it'. This is last year all over again with that fop, Lockhart. To say nothing of the previous year."

"I suppose," Snape said in oily tones that sounded far too smug, "that this would be a poor time to simply point out how Mister Potter is in the middle of all of these unfortunate events?"

"Yes," Minerva snarled, wishing the slimy bastard didn't have the right to speak his mind. She could see in several faces that doubts began to creep into minds of the staff that had moments ago been sure of Potter's innocence. Many people mocked and ridiculed the lack of common sense in the wizarding public. But the fact of the matter was it wasn't just common sense that was lacking. It was deductive reasoning. When faced with two arguments that sounded solid, they would generally remember the last one, simply because it was the most fresh within their minds and the arguments that much stronger because of it. Regardless of proof, since so much could be faked with the power they wielded in magic. Even the staff was not immune to this as Professors Hooch, Sinistra and even the Muggle Studies Professor Charity Burbage looked more than convinced and

wary. What was worse, they all knew of Hermione's time-turner and, while they knew she was keeping it secret, or supposed to, they also knew the girl was more loyal to Harry than anything or anyone else and so the boy, despite his alibi, could have bent time to do the deed.

"The point is," Pomona said, getting back on target, "that no one has been punished, and nothing public has been done as a deterrent. What is to stop this from escalating? Malfoy and his ilk are constantly causing trouble with Potter and what's to keep it from happening again? Or worse next time?"

"Potter-" Snape began, getting quite indignant at the slight upon singling out his house and Godson.

"Stuff it!" Bathsheba barked out, actually getting the Slytherin Head of House to shut his gabbing yapper due to surprise. "We all see what happens in the Great Hall. Not severe, but obvious. That's with faculty and other students around. What the hell do you think he does when they aren't? I honestly won't be surprised to see Malfoy spending more time in the hospital wing soon. Especially with the new backbone Potter's seemed to have grown."

"There will be no escalation," Dumbledore spoke into the fray, forcibly parting the verbal combatants by putting himself in between their conversations. "We will admit to the truth. We have been running an investigation and have narrowed the suspects down. Once caught, they will be punished as necessary."

Dumbledore had absolutely no idea just how much raw power and anger he would be going up against because he wanted to play peace maker.

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Harry's eyes darted about suspiciously, wondering why he felt the need to prepare for an attack as in another place, Dumbledore was breaking up and disbanding a verbal joust between Hogwarts staff. The feeling had been happening a bit more as of late since the latest Quidditch match a week previous. He was used to it, when he was about to walk into something, but for some reason, he was finding himself a bit more aware of things on a grander scale than his immediate vicinity.

There were a good deal many things that made the older magicals in the world seem more all-knowing and wise than just their age and knowledge. Older people, in general, were more worldly. They understood how things worked and could feel the energy of the people to read them, understand a state of agitation or nervous air amongst them. Harry had been able to see and feel this first hand in his previous life when the wizarding public had been finally told that Voldemort had returned. People were nervous, scared and high-strung. Those that actually left their homes were usually the ones that had no choice or were ones who had lived through the first war and had a better understanding of when things were about to get bad.

In other words, they were able to read the world around them. It was something one could also find in a veteran warrior. The older aurors had it. Service men who had seen war had it. Harry had long-since lost sight of what he was seeing, only acknowledging it was there, classifying it as required and then moving his eyes on, reading the next thing. But sometimes, when a person grew up faster than they were meant to, one who was younger could be aware of something in the wind changing. Of something coming.

Harry laid out several sickles onto the table for Tom at the Leaky Cauldron, paying for more than just the food and walked into magical London: Diagon Alley.

Harry had been dreading this part of the day's excursion. Knowing what he was planning to get, he had tied two moleskin pouches to his belt next to the Sword of Gryffindor on either side. One would be for whatever he felt to purchase while he was out while the other was for his first stop. Almost as soon as he entered Diagon Alley, thankfully with very few people, he went straight through until he reached Gringotts, veering left and entered Knockturn Alley. A darker, seedier part of the magical bazaar where one could get anything they wanted, for the right price. Some of the first shops weren't too bad. One could get the different sort of pet in the first, the sort not allowed in Hogwarts or most normal homes, even of the wizarding variety. The second was for the bizarre and strange, containing shrunken hands, petrified human remains, trinkets that had shady histories.

He passed a few hags that looked at him with glittering eyes and bulbous growths on their noses and chins. These were the sort of women that muggle myths were built upon when one envisioned a witch in that culture. These women also had a constant craving for human flesh, preferring children and usually little girls who held a beauty they knew they could never get back, though they found fingers of boys to be the perfect sort of snack. In fact, they started towards Harry the moment he approached until he looked at them in the eyes and glared, walking past and subtly unlocking three percent of his limiters, broadcasting his aura and making them retreat to the shadows. The changes their affliction left upon their bodies wasn't just aesthetic. It also weakened their bodies and made them hesitant to create confrontation unless it was with someone they could sense was weak, leaving him safe as long as he didn't act like the scared little boy he remembered his first time in that alley.

About half way down the alley and before it forked, he passed a second wand store that looked quite different than Ollivander's. There were far less wands inside and of the two, looked less seedy, oddly enough.

At the fork, he turned right, ignoring the harlots down at the other end of the left fork at the brothel and pub. In that pub, some of the worst sort spent their time since it was farthest from the entrance of the alley. The harlots, by mutual agreement, were considered too valuable to harm, so the werewolves that frequented the location tended to not go to the upper floors or outside areas where the women called to the passersby, not wanting to risk their blood calling to them. To the right, at the end of the alley, however, was Borgin and Burkes. This store was Lucius Malfoy's primary claim to fame and where Mundungus Fletcher sold a good many of his stolen wares.

It was also where rested the second half of the vanishing cabinet Harry had claimed from the Room of Requirement, placed there by Voldemort many years before. The man hadn't just cursed the Defense teacher position when he was last there. He had, even then, made plans and implemented them for his eventual return and conquest.

The bell jingled as Harry entered, making sure he kept his shoulders back, his back straight and his head held high. This was not the sort of place one wanted to allow weakness to show.

He perused the shelves, looking at the extremely large variety of dark, semi-dark and downright evil trinkets within the store. Not a single thing was what Dumbledore would consider "light". It was either meant to harm, to kill, to assist in either of the first two or was meant to frighten. There was a mummified hand that was labeled as attacking the owner in his sleep and choking him to death, which Harry considered getting for Snape before passing on.

There were crystals of various blooded animals and a surprisingly large number of vials of blood from virgins that Harry didn't want to contemplate since that sort of blood could only come from that virgin losing the very status that made the blood so precious. Otherwise, you could take blood from children or a single woman for years and have all you needed. There would be nothing special about it otherwise, which was why it was so valuable and such a powerful catalyst.

After all, if blood was so powerful because it was a physical property of life, then blood one could only gain in an act meant for creating life certainly then became more potent since it could only be obtained the once.

Then there were the curiously large number of darker tomes within the shop. Harry picked a few up, wondering if they would be of any sort of use.

"So, the great Harry Potter comes to my dark abode," a voice said from seemingly everywhere. "Not happy with Hogwarts' current teachings, I wonder? Hm?"

"I'm not fond of being snuck up on or having someone acting suspiciously hiding from me," Harry called out, looking unconcerned even as he prepped his magic to form a shield and he set his feet to dodge. "Come out and talk or I blast my way out. Three. Two..."

The mystery voice had no idea if it should believe the little brat, but then again, if anyone could get away with it, this would be one of the ones who could. Few people would probably even question what he was doing there in the first place, and certainly not over care of the proprietors. "You don't have to be such a Dumbledore, you know."

Harry chuckled despite himself. "I'll take the insult as it was meant and congratulate you on finding a unique way to curse his name that I think I may adopt."

"We're not here for sightseers," Borgin said. "What do you want?"

"That cabinet," Harry said, pointing towards the large wardrobe which he hadn't even looked at except in glancing, "all of your uncursed books, that shrunken head that insults people and those enchanted daggers."

Borgin looked mildly concerned as Harry pointed things out without looking at them, his eyes glued to the book in his hands. "You do realize those daggers leave cursed wounds, right?" He asked, knowing they could be traced back to him without much difficulty since they had actually been in the shop for a fair amount of time. "And why on earth do you want the head? You can't keep that kind of thing around in Hogwarts. Not unless you want people to know you're dark! Most of them would set off the Headmaster's alarms. These things will be traced back to me and I don't want to be dealing with the likes of Dumbledore, you hear?"

Harry waved off the man's concern, shutting the book and looking at him with annoyance. "The head is for a Christmas present for someone I hate. I hope to see his expression as he opens it. If anyone asks, you sold it to a man about six-two, scruffy and graying brown hair, lean, werewolf. The daggers, I know, leave a Flamebrand curse on their wounds, but that is the whole point of getting them. As for the books, I expect there are plenty of people out there who aren't happy with my history, as you well know, and I'd rather know what they're going to hit me with than toss about jinxes like it was a schoolyard fight. Either you want the gold and sell them, or you don't and I'll get them other ways. The choice is yours."

Borgin was many things, but a coward was not amongst them. "You little bastard! You think to threaten me?" Borgin pulled out his wand, quick as a flash and flung it towards Harry who glared and then the man was thrown backwards while his wand sailed into Harry's open hand.

"Yes," Harry hissed as objects within the room began to shake and wobble as his anger was fed upon by his partial opening of the power-limiting seal earlier. "I know the people you sell to," Harry

snarled, advancing on the cowering man. "I know what they want and what they do. One way or another, Mister Borgin, you will be parted with these items. The only question is whether you plan to be parted with anything else."

Borgin scuttled backwards and shook his head as the Sword of Gryffindor became visible on Harry's hip and enlarged itself, the metal blade literally humming loudly with a metallic ring as it sang to be used, Harry's magic charging the blade for something only it knew it could do. He pissed himself as Harry put his hand to the scabbard and flicked the sword upwards with his thumb and then drew the blade. "I'll sell! I'll sell!"

Had Borgin had his wand, he would have activated the anti-theft measures, but the frightening fact was that the boy had taken it from his hands without having to draw his own. Or he would have killed the boy and then sold him to the hags a piece at a time, after shaving the hair for the many things it could be used for, of course.

With his trousers soaking and leaking putrid yellow liquid all over the floor, Borgin sold Harry everything he wanted, along with all the books he admitted to having on warding, enchanting and curse breaking, most of which the man had never planned to part with but instead wanted to keep for his own collection to sell as a set much later. Harry had said 'all' the uncursed books, and since he seemed to know exactly where the items he wanted was at, he worried the boy knew about them, as well.

For his part, Harry felt sick for how this was turning out. He had already planned on buying certain things, but hadn't planned on taking it this far. Borgin, however, was a front man for the death eaters and one of their chief suppliers. Indirectly, he had caused a massive amount of suffering and Harry, while he couldn't quite put his finger on why, was furious with this man and wasn't willing to leave without getting what he came for. The cabinet and the daggers, no matter what, had to be taken from the store. The cabinet had been used to invade Hogwarts. It had to go. The daggers ... well, Harry couldn't quite understand why he needed those out of the store. There was something ... something about a memory of a memory. Like a ghost of a memory. Material but not firm. He could almost see a picture of someone having those daggers and doing horrible things with them, but he had no idea what or to whom. But he knew what they were. Somehow, he knew what curse they were

enchanted with even if he couldn't remember where he learned it. He knew they had been used on someone important to him.

And then he could see her. Bellatrix LeStrange, taking great care to scar the flesh laying on the floor beneath her as Harry watched. Hermione laying there, naked from the waist up as her skin was slowly being burned from the cursed blades, melting her flesh as the curse did its work. Her clothes were mere ash on the ground where the curse had already burnt through them and they had fallen from Hermione's shoulders. He could see the smiling faces of the Death Eaters who watched on gleefully and could remember the ones holding him bound with their wands chuckling and relishing in Hermione's pain.

Ron was already a melted slab of skin off to the side and Luna was struggling next to him as several death eaters took the opportunity to grab at her since the brunette had been forbidden by Bellatrix to touch and the blonde wasn't. Bellatrix wouldn't allow anyone else but herself to torture the one girl who was most like herself, so fully devoted to one man. Only she was allowed to make the girl scream, she had told them. Harry remembered Hermione crying out his name, even then trying to tell him to escape. And then he remembered rage and an explosion of self-sacrifice to make his best friend's pain end.

In the next life after Harry blew through his power-limiting seal in his anger, though Harry wasn't aware, it would have been the Cruciatus Hermione suffered from instead and she would have been less devoted during their sixth year, while Luna, instead of joining them on their hunting expedition because of her knowledge and contacts, would have instead been neglected and in a cell under the same manor home where even worse unspeakable things would happen to her, keeping the Balance.

Harry's face was darkening in righteous fury, spurring Borgin to work faster and add things to Harry's bottomless sack as he wasn't looking, hoping to just stuff everything in and get the frightening child out of his store.

"Er, f-forty-three galleons," Borgin stuttered, not really paying attention that he had given Harry nearly two hundred galleons' worth of merchandise from his counter alone, to say nothing of the seventy that Harry actually owed.



Harry tossed a sack onto the counter. "Fifty. I'll leave your wand by the door." Harry turned to leave, casting a rotating mirroring shield at his back to reflect and swing back whatever Borgin would send at him if he tried anything and never seeing the shopkeeper draw a spare wand from under the counter or Dobby become visible long enough to destroy the man's memory of the whole event and rewrite it to Master Harry's specifications. Lucius Malfoy, Dobby's previous master who was a bad, bad man would also find himself in a perfect memory simply taking the things from behind the counter.

Master Harry did say Dobby was allowed things when Dobby wanted them...

Harry left quickly and strode out of the dark alley, ignoring the harlots' calls of immeasurable pleasures or the hags as they hoped to catch him unaware, falling afoul of Dobby Potter and his belief that nothing was too harsh on those who would want to eat his Master. Though, the one that was charmed to attract hags and look like Master Harry certainly didn't seem too thrilled with Dobby's methods.

Harry's next stop was to where he hoped planning ahead would serve him well, especially after what he felt had to have been a seriously horrible nightmare. He went to the apothecary shop and up to the counter where the middle-aged man who sold him his potions to induce a growth spurt was sitting and taking inventory of his stock. "Mister Fields, it's good to see you again," Harry said, remembering the man's name from when he had given it at the start of the summer. Plus it was always good to make people believe they were memorable. Oddly enough, this one actually had been. But mostly because he had been as easy to manipulate as Ron.

Jacob Fields looked up and his eyes widened as Harry Potter walked up to the counter like an old friend. "Mister Potter! I mean, Lord Potter! What are you doing here? I mean, how can I help you?" He stuttered over himself, wondering why the boy was there when he should be in school.

"I was hoping you'd allow me to part with a lot of gold while I tried to get you to do the same with your potions," Harry joked, hoping to build a friendly rapport and forget the visions in his head as Dobby hit the unknowing boy with a cheering charm.

"Of course, Lord Potter!" Jacob said with a grin. Part Harry Potter with his gold? A lot of it? My word, the boy was a business genius! 'A genius I say!'

"Just 'Harry', please. I don't really care for my titles."

"As you say, Harry," Jacob preened, feeling light as a feather and wondering if Harry was coming for that not-so-subtle hint at an endorsement. "What can I part with for you today?"

"Actually, I was hoping to stock up on a lot of various healing potions," Harry said, trying to sound more like the kid he appeared to be. "I recently made it back home to my family's house and I found that it had a small medical wing. I guess it was for family births or something from a long time ago. Anyway, I've taken to training during the summers because I'm thinking about becoming an auror or hit wizard or something like that when I grow up and I was thinking it would be good to have potions to heal in case of an accident."

"I think you'd make an excellent auror, Mister Potter," Jacob said, hoping the boy would do just that and protect the people when he was older. "But, while I wouldn't mind selling the potions, wouldn't an emergency portkey to Saint Mungo's be more reliable and safer?"

'Dang, I didn't think that far ahead,' Harry thought bitterly. "Probably, but I've got aurors and an on-site healer. I really want to take my future seriously. Not to mention they'll be good to have when I've got a family, and if I'm going to buy some, I may as well do it now so I can fill everything up."

Actually, while it had started out as a lie, that wasn't exactly a bad idea. It would bear thinking about.

Jacob frowned, thinking. "Do you want to fill a standard manor house medical wing?"

Harry blinked. "What's standard?"

"How much do you plan on buying, Mister Potter?" Jacob fell back to proper etiquette since he didn't expect to make a decent job out of this after all.

"Uh, I need a large supply of pepper-up potions, blood replenishing, skele-grow, sleepless draughts, pain-relieving potions-

"That's enough, Mister Potter," Jacob said as he shook his head. "I'm one of the few apothecaries around and generally get enough traffic for daily uses and common maladies that I'm working most of my time to keep this place stocked. I'm afraid I couldn't possibly brew enough potions to supply your need. Even if you only needed them delivered by the end of the year, I'm afraid. For quality potions, you can't be stretched too thin. If you don't get some of those properly brewed, they'll do more harm than good."

Harry's face fell and he nodded helplessly, looking as downtrodden as he actually felt. He was hoping he could build a new side in the war that was coming, taking this time in the next two years to stock up on so many things that he could take care of his people when things got bad. It was ... Well, it made him feel like he had hit a barrier and that he could really fail in his over all mission since he failed, now, in something so trivial.

Something in his expression softened Jacob to the boy. Normally, he would never make the step he was about to, especially when he was going to be losing out on so much gold, but Harry's earlier actions had endeared him to the man. And there was still the hope of endorsements. "Lord Potter, there are those who are independent brewers. They have a tendency to be a little pricier because their potions are usually of the ... less favorable kind," Jacob hedged, unsure of how he thought suggesting this to a child, even the Boy-Who-Lived was a good idea. Many potions were addictive, and brewers often didn't care about whether or not their clients became so. It only meant more gold in their pockets if that were the case. Men like Snape made wonderful profits in the black market because of it.

"I need them and a lot of them," Harry said, feeling elated, which showed on his face. It made Jacob realize there was no going back, now.

"I require your word, Lord Potter, that you won't divulge any of what I tell you. They tend to assist me with materials when the school rush shows up in August and I will be forced to raise prices or be understocked should-

"You have my word that I won't do anything to betray yours or their confidence, so long as they don't do anything to anyone I consider a friend or hurt someone under my protection. Then your confidence is safe, but they won't be," Harry interrupted, hoping to get Jacob to divulge his secrets, but also not willing to allow anyone to hurt those he cared about again. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to run for long. Not after the ghostly images running rampant in his mind. 'That reminds me. I need to find Cho's dad and have a talk with him.'

"I suppose that's the best I could honestly hope for," Jacob said, understanding the threat the boy didn't seem to have realized he said. "There is a woman, and please don't let the fact she's a woman lead you to think less of her potions skill as she's actually leagues above myself. There is a woman by the name of Clara. She is often times known to accept jobs that are extremely delicate and require a master's touch. She should be able to help you, regardless of what you require."

"Just Clara?" Harry asked, pushing the obviously nervous man from behind the counter.

"Clara Zabini."

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"Master has given us new orders," Twinkle called out to the amassed fur people in their second-floor abode. They had built a tiny little city for themselves that, so far, only their Master Harry's moon girl had seen. And it was there that they had met while Claws, who had been present when orders were given to Twinkle, was hiding in the Transfiguration classroom with Master's Luna, ready to protect and maul.

"About time," Pitter-Patter growled out, her ears laying down atop her head. Her slightly-larger-than normal paws rested on her slimmer-than-normal hips and a single fang showed from under a furry lip where it was just a little too large for her. "What do we do now?"

"Our previous orders still stand," Twinkle explained with a nod of agreement with the female he wanted to groom. Her fur was always a little bushy, but she was rather fond of studying their prey and

learning how they acted, which intrigued him. It would probably mean they would better understand how they would react, meaning they would become more effective hunters. Unless she got sidetracked by something shiny again. "However, we now have another that takes priority over others. If someone Master wishes protected is about to get hurt, and we can use our own judgement if we haven't been told directly, we may take any actions needed to protect."

"What about past scratches," Tuft asked, swaying his tail back and forth in agitation, the tip which was his namesake flicking in anticipation. He was looking forward to getting back at the ones who dared braid his fur. 'And I've got just the karate-chopping weapon to eliminate their oh-so-precious dollies, too!'

"Past wounds or attacks must be considered behind us all," Twinkle stated firmly. "Swiping at them now would not teach them anything. They must learn to not do something when they attempt it. Otherwise, they won't know what they are being reprimanded for. Master was very clear about this." When not talking to Master Harry, the fur people found themselves reverting to some of their own vernacular, which was definitely more feline in nature. To them, 'swiping' was meant to be like rubbing the human children's noses in their wrongdoing or spanking them. The more time they spent in the world, the more unique they became and the more of their own culture was created.

"What about the ones who do not help?" Jinx asked. If humans were Thundercats, this one would be better known as Nymphadora Tonks. This one didn't trip or fall. In fact, it was one of the most graceful of them all. But she tripped everyone else and caused them all to fall. Even now, she had a wide birth around here save for Squeaks. His name was gifted to him because, somehow, he kept getting stepped on by Jinx and that was usually the sound he made. He would be the Ginny Weasley of the Thundercats. Only he took pride in pursuing Jinx and usually ended up beneath her feet because he was trying to steal her first kiss and her unlucky aura had thus far saved her from it. She was also one of the few with purple eyes that seemed streaked with pink lightning bolts, something that had evolved from their original appearance.

"We may play with them," Twinkle explained, thinking more in terms of a cat playing with a mouse before it ... died mysteriously since they would never have anything to do with that unfortunate event...

"While we're all here and talking, could we change shifts?" Snarf asked. "The lemony one keeps talking to himself and it's beginning to get uncomfortable." That, and Snarf had eaten a lemon drop from the dish when the man wasn't looking and still couldn't quite unpucker his face.

"You are now the most familiar with him," Twinkle stated. "If you feel he's becoming aware, then you may- RAT!"

A hundred furry heads with perked triangular ears turned as one to see the half-entered form of the rat that was looking around the castle, hoping to find a place to hide from his old animagus friend.

Instead, he found a large growl meeting him from the throats of so many Thundercats as they licked their furry maws.

Needless to say, Scabbers did not find this safe abode anywhere on the second floor. He did, however, find it outside of an open window where he instead learned that not all owls are asleep during the day.

Hedwig cracked her beak in irritation as the extremely juicy morsel fell through the bushes before she could snatch it with her talons. Still, she rather appreciated the large number of cat-creatures that stood at the windows and cheered her on. That was certainly new.

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"He's ... he's remembering his previous lives," Lora said, shocked. "But ... how! The memories don't even exist after Time is reset!"

The deep voice chuckled in amusement. "My daughter, you still have so much to learn. Three thousand years and still a teenager at heart."

Lora had the decency to blush. Physically, she may have nearly stopped aging at twenty, but because she and her kind lived for so long, their minds and bodies developed differently. Some stopped aging at six or eight and were stuck in their childlike personalities for a few thousand years when they were happy as they were. In Lora's

case, she was only just out of her rebellious phase. That didn't mean he had to rub it in, though. "Then what's happening?"

"Nothing is ever truly lost. For all of those realities where different choices could be made or things could have happened differently but for the hand of Fate, such as the wind blowing east instead of west, only one is truly within the realm of material and existence."

"Right, but how can he remember something sent to the Abyss?" Lora said, staring at Harry's memory, playing in the back of his head from his death before his last. In it, he had been much closer to both Hermione and Luna, having nearly developed his bonds fully with them both. Hermione had full faith in Harry and humored, if not trusted, his fears about Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape and was willing to help him look into matters and they had talked about the potions book that caused such strife in the next version of Harry's life. Luna, too, had been much closer, being respected by them both for her differences rather than being used as a scapegoat to mock and ridicule to make themselves feel more normal. Resetting that life back to second year resulted in them not meeting Luna and Hermione not bonding as closely and the last life Harry had experienced, which he remembered in full.

In this time line, Ron had still betrayed them, but had told the Snatchers that found him anything they wanted before eventually finding that the three had been found thanks to his squealing and he had been tortured and killed in front of his no-longer friends before Bellatrix LeStrange had chosen to hurt Hermione because she was as devoted to Harry as Bella was to Voldemort. She had shown how the Firebrand curse on the daggers she had purchased melted flesh and burned anything non-living into ruin on Ron's body, melting him into a lump of flesh.

Then she had turned the blade to Hermione.

Lora actually couldn't find it within herself to be upset with Harry for detonating his magical core to kill everyone within a hundred kilometer diameter. He didn't have the magical power to overpower several body-binds and breaking through the power-limiting seal had stopped Hermione's suffering and stopped Luna's before it had even started.

"You are aware that mortals can occasionally pull off feats that even immortals and demigods are incapable of? You remember that of your studies?"

"Yes," Lora said, refusing to meet the being's eyes, or where she felt they would be. In truth, she had always rather slacked on her literatures and stuck more with practical aspects. She was aware of this, but wouldn't be able to cite you any examples.

"The Abyss can be reached by anyone, child," the voice said, sounding something akin to sorrowful or pained. Lora couldn't tell which. "The boy strives to succeed and despairs over his lack of knowledge and memories. His Will is strong and he is bridging the non-space to retrieve what he knows he has lost."

Lora rather hoped he didn't retrieve the memory if his first time through the Tri-Wizard tournament. He couldn't handle just knowing he was bugged by a dragon, never mind remembering it. "So, he's going to remember everything?"

"He will remember that which he felt he should not forget or that which he would actively try to remember, though he has no true control. This was, relatively speaking in regards to his deaths, a recent memory, and a powerful one. Its resurrection is not one I am surprised he regained. How many or how much he will find, however, there is no way to know."

Lora truly felt pained for Harry as he remembered over and over again how the cut of the red-tinted blades melted the flesh of its victims, wishing powerfully that he didn't remember that event. She reached forward, trying subconsciously to stroke his hair to ease his anguish, but her fingers dipped into the liquid light of the Spheros, unable to truly touch that which was discarded into the Abyss. She didn't even care that Harry had been able to do something her kind was incapable of by doing just that.

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Harry got to the Ministry with a half hour to spare, having just come from Potter Manor where he elected to wear a set of fine robes that had been in the closet of the master suite instead of his school robes. He also had absolutely no intention of going into the Ministry with so many dark items, so he left them there rather than bring



them aside from the other vanishing cabinet when he changed. While he hated his fame and all the mindless sycophants who would love or loathe him depending on the day, he knew that he had to basically wade into the throng and be seen. Therefore, he couldn't be seen as Harry Potter, the school boy, but instead had to be seen as Lord Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived and would continue to win.

The only flaw was that he had no idea where everyone was meeting or if they had to do anything early or not.

"Mister Potter?"

Harry looked to the side before he got to the station to check his wand, hiding the feeling of relief when he spotted Cornelius Fudge coming from a side door and looking confused to see him. 'Sweet manipulation,' Harry thought as he smiled at the man in the lime green hat. "Minister Fudge. It's good to see you again," he proclaimed a touch louder than probably necessary, causing a few people to take note of the interaction.

Fudge, never one to pass up a chance at being associated with high-profile individuals and on friendly terms smiled magnanimously. "You as well, Lord Potter," Fudge said a little loudly in return, hoping others would remember the situation. "May I ask what you're doing here? Shouldn't you be in Hogwarts?"

"There is a meeting of the entire Wizengamot today, isn't there?" Harry asked, trying to sound sure of himself while silently wondering. The letter had said that there was, and the newspaper had said as much also when they found out about his other seats.

"Well, yes, but not for another half hour or forty-five minutes or so," Fudge muttered in confusion. Everyone usually showed up a few minutes before and went straight to the room unless they worked at the Ministry already.

Harry shrugged, feeling more at ease now that he felt he could get the man to help him out. "Well, I can honestly say I've not been to the Ministry before this point in time, so I was thinking of looking around. I don't suppose you know someone who could show me around the place? I've heard it's an interesting place to work and

was curious to see if there was anything I really wanted to look in to to see if I wanted to think about working here later or not."

Like waving a flag at a bull, Fudge smiled grandly and walked Harry past the check-in station, stopping only long enough to let Harry check his wand and get his receipt. "I'd be happy to help, my boy! This is the wand-station. Basically, only Ministry personnel are allowed a wand past this point, even lords, I'm afraid. You'll have to check your wand here and it goes through that little hole there into a magical repository where only your ticket can retrieve it. So be sure to keep that on you, now."

"Thank you, Minister," Harry said, actually having wondered about that. No one that he could remember had ever told him that before. They just simply said it was the way of things. But, everyone he had ever gone to the Ministry with had been allowed to keep theirs, so he was never sure of what made them take his. He just always thought they didn't want him using it. Still, that made sense. Like security personnel in a building. They would be allowed their weapons, but no one else was. So, this made sense, finally, to Harry.

Fudge knew Harry was basically just a normal kid, despite his list of titles and economical power. While he could have pointed out his own office and spoke of how important he was to the wizarding world, this was one boy he didn't want anywhere near that office in any official capacity unless he was endorsing the current Minister! Instead, he decided to do something smart. While Fudge was deplorable in many ways such as taking bribes or using people to meet his own gains, he didn't get to his position because he was easy to buy. Well, not only because he was easy to buy. He decided to take Harry to the places that would interest him and that he would feel inclined to brag about later to his friends, thus ingratiating the boy to the Minister, getting him hooked on favors.

"While I could show you the normal Ministry, we haven't a lot of time to roam about, and the legal side of things is both time-consuming to cover and I admit, rather boring," Fudge said, actually projecting a fun persona that Harry was finding himself liking, oddly enough. "Instead, why don't I show you some of the more interesting places so you actually have something interesting to remember, hm?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you!" Harry said, honestly pleased.

"The Ministry is made up of three branches," Cornelius began as they descended on a lift. "There's the administrative branch, which is what you see upstairs and that we'll be in the thick of later. It's generally a bunch of boring talks and people arguing and no one budging a bit in what they want. The real secret there is not showing weakness or backing down because, if you do, they'll think you're close to breaking and keep going until you do. You've got to get them to do so first. So, while the most active, it's generally the most boring."

"And then there's the law enforcement side," Harry interrupted, suddenly seeing a way to get to go to the other side that was usually hidden. "It's basically like the muggle bobbies. They make sure laws are upheld and go where they need to in order to keep the peace. So, since that's nothing special, I assume we're going to the mystery third spot?" Harry asked.

Cornelius quickly jabbed a button as he smiled nervously, and possibly in constipation. "Of course, my boy!" The door dinged and opened, causing the Minister to make a strange chuckle that sounded between a laugh and a moan of pain. "Just letting you see the department that keeps everyone safe," he professed, taking his cap off and screwing it up as the doors closed again. He had originally planned to show the boy how they were tracking Sirius Black and show how safe everyone was with the Ministry on the job. After all, what boy didn't dream of becoming an auror? Unless they wanted to be on the other side and do evil things, of course, though Fudge felt that wasn't likely. Still, so much for trying to make a weapon of the boy.

The door dinged again and opened, showing a location that was completely empty of other individuals. "Th-this is the Department of Mysteries," Cornelius stated, walking forward. Normally, only Ministry personnel were allowed down here, and the higher-ranking ones at that. But, since Harry was a Lord, in a way, that meant he had a job, right?

"I've heard of this place," Harry said, his tone between pained memories and honest awe of the power of the surrounding areas. "This is where the Ministry studies ancient magic, right?"

"Of course," Fudge said, leading Harry on briskly. No point dawdling. "There's almost no one down here today since I've assigned almost

every single Unspeakable, that's the name given to those who work down here since they aren't allowed to talk about their work since it's top secret, the task of finding out who the heirs are for the Founders."

Harry blanched, knowing no good would come of this and also wondering if an entire department had really been working on finding out who the heirs were for so long and still had nothing. Of course, will all the inbreeding, it wasn't as simple as following bloodlines. But at the same time, speaking up would help put the man less behind Malfoy and more behind himself. "Why didn't you tell me you wanted to know?" Harry asked, trying his best to sound confused and innocent. "I could have told you that."

"Whu-what?" Fudge spluttered, eyes wide and his mouth hanging open.

"Yea, I'm the one who controls all the Founders' seats and votes," Harry said, trying to act nonchalant. A little hard when you felt like you were going to throw up. "So, what's so special about this place? Is there anything really neat you can show me?"

Fudge panted in shock and surprise, nodding absently as he shuffled forward, his movements more in line with inferi than a living man. "You ... you're the one in control of all of them?" After getting that underage exemption, Fudge honestly would have expected Harry would rush to tell him the good news. 'It has to be Dumbledore's doing,' Fudge decided.

"Yes," Harry explained. "Believe it or not, my mother was a descendant of Slytherin and Hufflepuff. Interesting records about the stuff they did in their day," Harry said, hoping to entice the older man with secrets. "Sadly, they've made it so their diaries can't be taken from their vaults. I may have to go and copy them some time so people can see how things happened then."

Fudge swallowed, his throat so tight the liquid actually seemed to squeak on its way down. This would be a powerful ally, or a powerful enemy. And his only chance was to make the boy an ally as quickly as possible. And that meant impressing the hell out of him. "Well, this first room is the Time Room."

"Time room?" Harry asked. "Like a break room?"

Fudge actually laughed, feeling a little more at ease at seeing the boy so ill-advised and wondering how to get him away from Dumbledore to manipulate. "No, my boy. It's called the Time Room because all of our experiments and knowledge of Time are hidden here."

Harry's eyes widened comically as Fudge actually opened the door and began to lead him in. Harry didn't know what came over him, but he knew this was far too good of an opportunity to pass up. Silently and without his wand, he summoned a dozen time-turners from the cabinet to his left, ones that looked just like the ones Hermione had, and let them flood his belt pouch, silently closing the door as he walked by even as he summoned larger ones from the cabinet to his right that were as large as his hand and some as large as a saucer. As he moved to close that cabinet, he swiped his hand and conjured copies of the scrolls and ancient books in the cases to one side and let them fly into his pouch as well for later acquisition into his grimoire.

Harry suddenly straightened and tried to control his breathing as Fudge turned in the middle of the room and looked at Harry. "This room is almost always off limits, but since no one knows we're down here, we'll just keep this our little secret, alright?"

"Oh, I don't want to risk getting you into trouble, sir," Harry said, his heart racing and his breathing coming out heavier. He couldn't believe himself! 'Here lies Harry James Potter,' Harry thought in a false voice in his head. 'Died horribly before he could reach the rank of 'master' thief.' Not exactly a comforting thought.

"Don't worry, my boy," Fudge said, waving off Harry's concern with more confidence than he felt right then. "I'm the Minister. I could always just give you a temporary job, if you'd like. Would that make you feel better?" Internally, Fudge's thoughts were totally different. 'Please Merlin say yes! Otherwise, I'm so screwed it isn't even funny!'

Harry shook his head, not sure what getting a job for even a single day would mean. "Oh, no sir. I think I may still be too young. Does the Ministry do anything like curse breaking?" He asked, suddenly having the most Slytherin thought he had ever conceived of. "I

thought about going to Gringotts bank and working as a curse breaker there. I know someone who does that and it sounds really exciting! They've even shown me their library where they let their curse breakers study! They've also offered to get me tutors."

Fudge nearly had a heart attack. There was no way he could lose Potter to the goblins! "No!" Fudge near yelled before having a coughing fit. "Er, no, no. We have our own library, too. Anything we ever find is archived here! You'll never find a more complete library anywhere!" The Minister looked at his pocket watch, seeing they still had fifteen minutes to spare. Plenty of time to let him see the Archive without breaking the Ministry's rules. At least, not if he went to the closer and more restricted one where no one would know about it.

Harry's blood sung in his veins as he summoned a few last things that had been in Fudge's vision earlier and was led through a few doors into dusty, stone catacombs that were obviously where the Ministry had originally obtained its start. After a few moments, they hit a wall where Fudge pierced his thumb against a bronze plate by a stone door that glowed a dark, blood red that Harry could tell was dangerous to anyone who wasn't blood-bound to access it. Then Harry gasped as the sight of a location that had to be larger than Hogwarts whose walls were a few dozen stories high and packed with ancient tomes and scrolls was revealed behind the stone door rolling away. And in the center, going up equally as high, were shelves upon shelves of the same. 'I'm glad Hermione never found this place in fifth year. We would have never heard from her again.'

"As you can see, when you're ready, we have more than enough books for you, Harry," Fudge said rather smugly. "This place is off limits except by certain requests, but I'm sure if you worked here we could let you study to your heart's content. Usually, the Unspeakables would stop anyone from coming through here, but since they're all chasing you down," Fudge chuckled nervously again, to a point where Harry was seriously beginning to wonder if the man suffered from ulcers, "no one was here to stop us. Only the Head Unspeakable, myself and those who used to hold our positions are allowed access here or they must accompany us. But few people know it even exists since there's a smaller version for other people to see that is about the size of Hogwarts' own library. But if you wish it, I'll be sure to authorize you if you work here."

Harry could feel his ears warm as his heart pumped faster. "Are all of these on warding and curse breaking?" He asked, not having to fake his awe in the slightest. He had thought his family's archive was impressive, but this! This was a whole new form of impressive!

Fudge shifted before shaking his head, knowing it better to not lie about something so trivial. "No. They're this way. I'll show you just so you know I'm not teasing you. Here, we have basic charms and transfiguration sections," Fudge stated, leading Harry through and reading the huge signs so he could talk and sound more knowledgeable, believing Harry wouldn't pay attention to the signs with all the books around. "Then we've got potions books and enchanting. Over here are rituals and darker, blood-based magics. Then we've got warding over here."

As the man was speaking, Harry took the time to look down each row and jab his hand forward, conjuring copies of the whole row and then summoning them to his pouches amidst silencing spells to keep the fluttering pages from alerting the Minister. All Harry knew was that there was simply no way he could pass this up. If only a few people came by or even knew about this place, then copying these wouldn't show up in the slightest. It was simply, as Hermione had said at breakfast long ago, sharing knowledge with everyone. Or at least with Harry. He had no idea if it was going to be needed or even useful. But he knew that every little bit he got, he could use against Voldemort and the Ministry later when needed.

So, he got everything down each row and for as far as he could see without risking getting anything in Cornelius' peripheral vision. At least until they got to warding, which Harry was most interested in.

"These," Cornelius said with a large smile, "are warding books. They're mixed in with the Runes and Arithmancy because they're so closely related," he explained, seeing Harry pick up one of those subjects from the shelf. "But as you can see, we have anything you could want to study, so you certainly have no reason to go to the goblins when you could work for your fellow man."

"Thank you, Minister. I think I'll reconsider. They didn't have anything like this." As Fudge smiled and began to lead Harry away, the boy sent a wave of magic to copy as much from behind him as his magic could and then summoned it all to his pouches, hoping he got some good stuff. He had no idea what was around the warding section or

further back, but he knew he was able to get everything his magic could.

At least until his pouches apparently reached their limit and several hundred books fell to the floor in a heap.

While the books themselves were silenced, all that displaced air and dust from so many falling was not so easily hidden. Not when Harry was too surprised to stop it. So, the blast of wind from so many pages and covers fanning themselves hit the Minister, causing him to stop curiously and then turn around.

Harry didn't have time to contemplate and banished the silenced books up and away, off to the far side of the library and into the far wall where several hundred original books were knocked off the shelves, causing a deep, echoing rumbling to soon reach them.

The ominous sound made the Minister flinch and grasp Harry by the shoulder, rushing him forward. "Terribly sorry, my boy! But this place has ancient wards and defenses from the founding of the Ministry! There's no telling what that is, so perhaps we should go. Since you're not keyed in, you may not be safe and I couldn't live with myself if any harm came to you," he rushed out, quickly pushing Harry forward. It was true, too. Fudge would feel horrible if something hurt Harry. Because whatever did it would probably come after him next.

Seven minutes later, the Minister and the new burglar were up on the regular floors of the Ministry and heading into the council chambers where Harry saw Mister Lovegood, along with all the other reporters, looking for any sign of who the Founders' heirs were. Whether it was for his newspaper or out of sheer curiosity, Harry didn't know, since the man didn't have a camera with him, but he wouldn't leave him, or by extension Luna, out.

"Mister Lovegood!" He called out, smiling at the man that looked remarkably like Albert Einstein. At least in relation to the hair.

In a move eerily similar to the Thundercats of only moments before, all the reporters' heads turned to look at the young voice who called out for one amongst their ranks, sensing exclusivity in their dark, reporter veins. One, who was hoping to fly into the chamber to watch proceedings in the form of a beetle couldn't help but fly back



out as it witnessed a surge in the humans below, leading away from the doors.

"Mister Potter! How did you become Lord Potter?" A random voice called out.

"Did your father really leave you to die and go into hiding for all these years?" Another called out.

"Harry?" A distracted voice from Xenophilius Lovegood asked, knowing the boy best by that name after the dozens of letters his daughter had sent him.

"Mister Potter, do you know who the Founders' heirs are?" Another random voice called out as the reporters surged around him.

Knowing the secret was out and that people would learn soon anyway, Harry decided the Quibbler was about to get its first Harry Potter exclusive. "Of course I do," Harry said, somewhat curious as to how the noise died down to an almost deathly silence. "And I've already promised the Quibbler an exclusive on everything, I'm sorry."

Outraged voices yelled over one another to be heard as they all tried to get him to talk, even as Xenophilius scratched his head in apparent confusion. "I'm sorry, Mister Potter. I seem to have forgotten all about that. Those blasted wrackspurts are everywhere these days."

Harry smiled warmly, happy this man was Luna's father. He didn't think she could have been anything remotely like who she was if it weren't for him. "Well, it's yours if you want it, Mister Lovegood. I figure since you're Luna's father, you get exclusive rights to me whenever you want."

The crowd was nearly becoming violent at the perceived slight upon them by this action. They were beginning to jostle each other and try to get closer, trying to be heard over the others and get the boy was ignoring them to respond again.

Xenophilius nodded, thinking about how much money the Quibbler would get out of this, even if it was going to be a lot of work. "I think

I'd like that. I'm sure Luna would be quite displeased with me if I elected otherwise."

Finally, having had enough of being ignored, the rabble reached its crescendo and someone bumped into Harry hard, nearly knocking him over as the reporters began to get unsettled and riled up from being ignored. Harry wasn't about to accept it.

"Get back!" Harry roared, shoving outwards with a visible aura around him, knocking the reporters down and shoving them about a dozen feet outwards from him and Xenophilius. It was suddenly very quiet and Cornelius, who had been at the other end of the hall where he had paused to speak to a secretary to get things moving on finding out about Harry's claims, was goggling even as his secretary began to hyperventilate.

And it wasn't because she was scared.

"What's wrong with you people?" Harry roared, not seeing the beetle peel itself from the ceiling and lazily moving back and forth in disorientation before making its way into the conference room. "You will give us our personal space or I'll really get pissed off! The next person who tries to knock me over gets a stinging hex in their left arse cheek!"

Never mind he didn't have a wand. The reporters didn't realize and didn't care. They simply got up and rushed away, being suitably cowed by Harry's display. Being so frightened, they wouldn't even notice that he didn't have his wand.

'A wonderful friend, indeed,' Xenophilius thought of his daughter's best friend. 'I wonder if it is too early to start picking out names for my grandchildren.'

"Sorry about that," Harry said with a blush as he turned back to the older man who was watching him with a curious glint in his eye. "It annoys me when they can't respect people's privacy and try to force me to do things."

'Yup! Too early.' Xenophilius chuckled in good nature. "Not to worry, Harry. Reporters may not like it, but they can be trained. And it seems you've figured out a simple way to teach them."

Harry grinned. "I was wondering if you'd like to talk about stuff after this. I was also hoping to ask if you'd be okay with it if Luna joined Hermione and I at Hogsmeade in the future."

Xenophilius clasped the boy warmly on the shoulder, the dad in him hoping his little girl found happiness by this boy and the reporter in him enjoying a good scoop while the naturist in him was curious about how he'd react in their home. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. Absolutely no part of him disliked this idea. "Why don't you come by my home when you're done? Just floo 'The Rookery' and you'll find me. Now, you should go in. They're about to start things and you need to be in your seat. Yours is top-center. Look for your coat of arms and good luck, Harry."

Harry thanked the goofy-haired man and walked into the chamber, not letting his nervousness show as virtually all parties within the chamber stared at him, most with sneers, many with indifference and some with curiosity while others, like Augusta Longbottom, he just couldn't read.

A few minutes later, everyone was taking their seats and casting curious glances to the seats reserved for the founders when Dumbledore entered, looking straight up to Harry's location and nodding when he saw Harry was there and had made it. After he had taken his own place towards the front and facing everyone, he tapped a gavel lightly. "This meeting of the Wizengamot on November thirteenth of nineteen hundred and ninety-three on our calendar is called to order. Presiding is Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore."

Dumbledore turned to the scribe who was creating a transcript of the day's meeting. "Are all parties present and accounted for?"

"All but the seats of Slytherin, Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. All the other active seats are either already imprisoned or on the run."

"Whoever claimed these seats should be in Azkaban for not appearing," Delores Umbridge stated, standing as she spoke as was custom. "I say our first order of business is to set out a warrant for their arrests."

Feeling the adrenaline coursing through his veins and feeling like he was about to throw up, Harry stood and projected his voice strongly, hoping that would cover for the nervousness he felt. "Actually, I am Lord Harry Potter, and I claimed these seats by virtue of blood."

"Don't lie, boy!" Lucius Malfoy said angrily, but not nearly as viciously as he would have liked. "You may have taken your seat as a Potter, but that doesn't give you the right to claim other seats." If it had, Lucius would have paid an awful lot to have done so.

Harry glared at the blond aristocrat. "You will address me as Lord Potter, Mister Malfoy. Unlike you, I've come by the title without buying it. And I happen to wear the rings to support my claim."

Lucius obviously bristled at being rebuked, and was more than a little shocked the brat had stood his ground and even more so that he actually did claim to hold those seats. Though he would think up a suitable punishment for telling everyone his family had purchased the title.

"Lord Potter," Dumbledore warned carefully, "perhaps you should keep your own advice in mind while dealing with this esteemed body of individuals?"

Harry nodded, looking properly contrite, but still unable to not provide one last jab. "You're right. I apologize for taking myself down to his level of pettiness." Several within the room who would normally laugh with the person who held the most power found themselves unsure of what to do. Potter had a large block of votes behind him, but Lucius, while having far fewer votes, was more likely to pay them a visit in the middle of the night.

So they thought.

"Can you prove you are who you claim to be, Lord Potter?" Umbridge asked, looking as though she expected to be calling for his head very soon.

Rather not liking Umbridge, Harry showed his ring and cycled it between the various coats of arms. "You may freely come and look at my rings if you wish."

Not being willing to leave her place by Cornelius, and possibly thrown out even if she was sitting proxy for a family she was blackmailing, Umbridge merely gnashed her teeth and gave up, letting things continue. There would be a very swift and very extreme search into genealogy lines to disprove the little upstart, and then he would pay.

Up amongst the rafters, a little beetle's eyes sparkled as she got her biggest scoop of her life. The Harry Potter was heir of all of the Founders and Lucius Malfoy had bought his title? Oh yes. She would get properly drunk so she could figure out the best way to write this out and then send it to be published.

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'Potter looks down at the pathetically weeping Dark Lord Voldemort, not listening to his pleas for forgiveness! The boy knew he could not show this man mercy as Dumbledore would do or the whole world would soon perish! He squeezed his hand and the massive power he held crushed the Dark Lord to bits and the war was over! Rah!'

Harry knew he probably shouldn't have been using his legal pad that had been put in all the places where the members of the Wizengamot would sit for doodling. But he had really underestimated just how horribly boring this would be. It would seem Dumbledore wasn't exaggerating nearly as much as Harry thought when he said it was a stuffy room filled with old people.

In light of that fact, he had drawn his defeat over Voldemort seven times now. Each method more different from the last. And best of all, these legal pads were charmed so only the one who sat the seat it was assigned to could really read it. Therefore, all of those who were below Harry who gave mildly concerned looks, or simply looked at him curiously, were wondering who he was taking so many notes on and what that childlike mind was coming up with for alliances and his own agenda.

Harry didn't notice any of that, however, as stick-figure him was crushing stick-figure Voldemort's tackle while stick-figures Hermione and Luna kicked him in the head.

An hour of discussing old topics and other things that Harry really couldn't figure out why they would matter to a government, 'Really,

why should it matter if someone is going around buying mass amounts of butterbeer just because he doesn't show his face?', another topic came up that caused Harry's furious scribbling to halt.

"Our next order of business is the tax rate from the muggle currency to galleons. It has been proposed an additional one percent be taken on all conversions. The Ministry's coffers have suffered from our spending on tracking Sirius Black and we believe the additional surge in funds would provide us enough to pay our aurors and expedite his arrest," Dumbledore stated, reading from the agenda put through for the day. "Those against this motion may speak now."

Realistically, no one had ever argued against a tax hike on muggleborns before. They have argued against them should they be found too large, but a single percent, at this moment, would raise it to sixteen percent. Dumbledore suspected, as was the norm, to pause only long enough to give someone the chance to speak before his gavel would hit, but even though he was already swinging away, Harry's voice stopped him.

"I oppose."

Dumbledore whipped the gavel up so quickly, shocked to have had an opposition, that he almost whacked himself in the face. "What?" Not only Dumbledore, but several voices began to mumble, wondering what Potter was playing at.

"It is my understanding that Auror spending is currently frozen. There are no additional funds going into the program to gain new recruits or to spend on overtime. No new supplies are being purchased and the Ministry, from what I've been able to gather, has done nothing significant since Black's escape to warrant additional spending, and certainly not a knut of it went through the Auror department. For that reason, I oppose this tax hike since it appears to be a fraudulent reason that bears scrutiny. If the Aurors are being blamed, but we know they can't be spending the money, then I would suggest finding out where that money has gone, first. If anything were to be done for example, I would suspect that some aurors would have been in Hogsmeade on the school's first weekend there, but there hadn't been a single one. And we already knew he was planning on going that direction because guards from Azkaban had heard him talking about it the day before he escaped."

Shocked faces looked up at the boy who gazed at each one, trying to read faces, though he was failing miserably. For a brief moment, most were only shocked that someone had actually opposed, but others were doubly so when Amelia Bones spoke next.

"I agree with Lord Potter," the strict woman said, actually glad to have this brought up. "As the Head of the DMLE, I can verify that not only has our budget been frozen, but a quarter of our annual funds removed. If any of this money is missing, it is not due to our efforts. We've had to shorten hours to keep our numbers just because we aren't allowed to hire more at a time. However, you make another valid point, Lord Potter. On future Hogsmeade weekends, I will ensure to have a small group of aurors available there during that day." Secretly, she was furious she hadn't come up with the idea. Her niece went on those weekends!

"Thank you, Lady Bones," Harry said with a nod, truly grateful.

"Actually, I think an internal audit could do the entire Ministry some good," Augusta Longbottom stated, watching several faces pale around here, as did Amelia. "I would like to add a Ministry-wide audit to the docket and propose a motion to do just that. In light of our financial troubles, it is obvious we should do so to know where we stand anyway."

"I could get behind that," Harry said with a grin.

"I believe the term you are looking for is 'seconded', Lord Potter," Amelia said with a large smile of her own. "However, I will save you the trouble and do so myself. The house of Bones seconds the motion for a Ministry-wide audit."

Fudge jumped in his seat and squeaked as Dumbledore's gavel hit with a resounding 'clack'.

"Motion is carried. The next item of business is werewolf registration. This proposal would require all werewolves to register themselves and how they would spend their times during the full moon to ensure the safety of others. Is anyone opposed?" Dumbledore looked up to Harry, expecting the boy to oppose and scrunching his brow as he realized Harry was watching attentively and not speaking up against the action. After a moment longer than he would usually wait,

expecting Harry to speak up, he snapped the gavel and then asked for those who supported the motion.

"The house of Potter supports the motion," Harry said before Umbridge, who had put the motion through, could, shocking most of those present.

"You what?" Dumbledore asked, being too surprised to keep his usual wits about him in that chamber.

"What?" Harry asked, honestly unsure of why this was so surprising or a bad thing. "Werewolves are normal people most of the time, but when they're transformed, they're dangerous. Even if that's the only time unless they're bad people in general, at which point being a werewolf doesn't matter except that they're stronger and have better senses and greater resistance to magic. Even I've heard of those like Fenrir Greyback. He happily spreads the disease around. Those like him should be registered and probably locked up. But since we can't lump all werewolves in with him, it should be a registration process. At least then we know who isn't doing something horrible."

"Don't you think that view is a little ... harsh, Lord Potter?" Dumbledore asked, plainly terrified that Harry wasn't opposing this. While the argument was sound, it didn't matter. Harry Potter should not be for supporting such actions. It wasn't the kind thing to do.

"I'm not saying we lock them up each full moon," Harry said with a frown. "Though offering to if they have nowhere safe probably wouldn't hurt and probably help more, but if registering means we know who is safe, or if there's a way to track down those who are spreading the disease somehow, then I'm all for it. You didn't say anything about restricting them or subjugating them, so there's nothing like that that you had us vote on without warning, right?"

"Of course not!" Dumbledore said, sounding affronted.

"Then all we're really voting on is basically finding out who is a werewolf and possibly getting some numbers to find out how many there are."

"The house of Malfoy seconds the motion," Lucius said, having already made a deal where he would do so with Umbridge. He wasn't very happy about agreeing with Potter on anything, though.



Dumbledore sighed and cracked his gavel once more. "Motion passed. Onto our next order of business..."

For the rest of the hour the group was coming up with various laws, Harry paid attention and found nothing else to vote on. He either didn't know anything about whatever it was, or got lost in the conversations, not really understanding what they were talking about at all. During those times, he spent thinking about his stolen trove of goodies and began to wonder how much and of what he had obtained.

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[Author's Note:] – Next chapter revolves around the relationship.

(1) – Status as a lord. It strikes me that many people will use the title as an honorific, but I wondered, WHY don't we ever see more reality in this title? Thus, I've put in a little history (all true) and given that to Harry, along with any other lord. While many may have purchased titles, some truly do own land and what amounts to 'vassals'.

(2) Security – If anyone can think of a better security system, functional by both magical and not, I would like you to offer it. Succeed, and I grant you either any one question answered about this story, regardless of what it is, or a scene within that you request, regardless of the nature of it.

Ministry for Magic – This is something I've been kind of curious about. There is one author, in particular (Radaslab,) who gives powerful and extraordinarily detailed histories for the government(s) in his stories. While I appreciate that, I don't care to know all the different people, for the most part, up to present. I chose to go away from government history and more with 'secret society' history. We know of the "Knights Templar", "Free Masons", "Illuminati" and others (yes, I just took the three more currently popular ones.) Heck, even in CANON we have the Order of the Phoenix (ineffective as it was) and the same could be said for Voldemort's Death Eaters. But, why not something similar in the magical world? I do that here. It isn't very detailed in the chapter, but I plan to expound upon it later.

Paladeus

## Chapter14 – First Domino

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Rating: M

Warnings: Suggestive Language, Suggestive Themes/Situations,

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic",  
§Parseltongue§

xXxXxXx

[Author's Note:] - Next chapter already almost complete at 32K words right now.

Gotta thank KatDemon18 for the Owl Alliance concept and Kitty Foxxe for her idea for a challenge that I'm adding in here (mostly) to touch up the dreary atmosphere a bit since things are about to get very ... proactive. The latter has a Crookshanks challenge on her profile wherein I realized I'm basically ignoring the furball. \*Rallies\* No more I say! With the whole cat thing I've already got, I'm actually kind of ashamed of myself for forgetting the original. KatDemon18 bounced usable methods for it with me. Awesome mind in that one (she has an answer to this challenge visible from the first chapter, if you're curious, under her previous pen name "KittyDemon18".) I swear, that girl is like my own Hermione. She's brilliant.

Search for "Legal End" if you do not care to find out about the next paragraph's reasoning.

Why the last chapter and this one are so important: This was asked by many. Remember there is a stagnate growth from just about the Middle Ages, so much of their society shall reflect this. I just want to explain some holes in Canon and explain why things are able to happen in this story as they are since it also explains some of Harry's abilities, legally speaking. If the Ministry is so powerful and able to get away with so much, why not just step in and do more? Why allow so many people to get away with so much and to so many people? Why not just control Harry magically? This first scene is partly to finish that, but also to answer several questions many of you had about how they could pass laws with only two or a few people voting for or against something. This isn't meant to be

realistic in our way of thinking. It is meant to explain why the wizarding world is so screwed up.

Many of you brought up soul magic for the security system. So many, in fact, that I will explain in-story why that is not being accepted (next chapter.) I thank you all for your ideas, though.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Fuzzy Wuzzy Protector" by ssjgokillo (H/Hr/L – An entry from one of my own challenges on my forum) – Also, another entry to this challenge has been added at the end of the list on chapter 1 (or by Ruskbyte for those who know him already.)

xXx Previously xXx

"The house of Malfoy seconds the motion," Lucius said, having already made a deal where he would do so with Umbridge. He wasn't very happy about agreeing with Potter on anything, though.

Dumbledore sighed and cracked his gavel once more. "Motion passed. Onto our next order of business..."

For the rest of the hour the group was coming up with various laws, Harry paid attention and found nothing else to vote on. He either didn't know anything about whatever it was, or got lost in the conversations, not really understanding what they were talking about at all. During those times, he spent thinking about his stolen trove of goodies and began to wonder how much and of what he had obtained.

xXx STORY xXx

When the meeting of the Wizengamot was finally adjourned, Harry had to fight with his instincts to not dance a merry jig. Something that he had already known, but had admittedly forgotten with his time away from Mrs Figg, is that old people loved to talk. That held true in the magical world just as much the muggle. And apparently, the more important you were, at least when in regards to politics, the more you felt that desire to hear your own voice drone on, and on, and on.

He knew it wasn't totally true, at least as far as he could tell. According to Neville, his grandmother was rather powerful politically,

and that woman, while she spoke a bit, she didn't go out of her way to do so. Usually, she only spoke up while working with Amelia Bones. He was almost willing to bet that some of what they did in there was choreographed. He had only ever seen the twins work so well in sync together, though much of the school would say the same about him and Hermione. And with Luna in the mix, the phrase 'they fit together pretty well' was becoming more commonplace since she was, as often as not, laying in laps or cuddled up against at least one of them like a human jigsaw puzzle. It had started as a joke, but things have a way of growing life and then off on their own.

That was why they tried to keep shiny things out of the common room or there would be no telling what mischief Luna could get into.

Harry had found himself curious about how two people could pass motions to get laws established or, in the case of his own accidental motion, cause an audit of the entire government. His rings, as it turned out, held the answer. What he had done didn't actually cause the audit to happen. It merely put it on a docket to be brought up in a future meeting. Only things that had been brought up in a previous meeting could be voted on. At least in regards to laws.

There were exceptions, of course. Times of war when a state of emergency had been declared or just simply actions taken during a war could be activated immediately, but that was also a time where all members found themselves forced to show up and when immediate action could save lives. There were no options available to sit a session out during a time of crisis without incurring the wrath of the government as there was during peacetime. Basically, any time the whole Wizengamot met, which could be requested by anyone if they wanted action taken and didn't mind being seen as very rude, thus forcing it to happen, could a law be passed immediately since everyone had to at least be made aware of the laws or amendments to be put through. But it was only required bi-annually for the entirety of the Wizengamot to meet or once a state of emergency or war had been declared, that all members were to sit and not miss any meetings. And only in the latter two could a law be passed immediately. Though they were all required to be there that day, since there was no state of emergency, there was no reason to do more work in the eyes of the government who had awakened and, in a few cases as seen when they arrived, keeping

them from going back to bed since one ambitious member still wore his fuzzy house slippers.

In Harry's case, Dumbledore had asked for anyone opposed or for Harry's accidental audit. No one had opposed, since it would be obvious that those who did had something to hide and they would hope other departments were focused first so they could forge some records. That meant that one person was then a majority rule, and a second was then considered the overwhelming majority since it was then double the other side or, since there wasn't a single person refusing, also considered 'unanimous'. And since no one forced the issue, as it was considered very poor etiquette and form to do so, it would be on the docket of the next meeting, where only those who wanted to feel important, or those who had something to hide, would apparently show up. And since they weren't in a time of war, even though everyone was present, since no one requested an immediate action vote, it would be passed to the next meeting so people had the opportunity to vote, or elect not to.

As odd as it seemed, not everyone had to vote on the Wizengamot!

That was the very same reason Harry wasn't forced to either give up his additional seats, without a wife or proxy to sit for him, or get a wife for them if he wanted to keep them. And not a single person in that room was willing to force Harry to become more powerful by ordering he take a wife. At least not until they could figure out a way to get their daughters into those roles, of course. He couldn't use the Founders' seats because to do so would require dissolving them into his own family's collection, but that was not possible because they had always been honorary seats up to this point in time.

When the Ministry was first created, those seats were given in honor of those who would create a single location to train their young in a safe environment and without the need for apprenticeships as had been the case for centuries beforehand. It was a tribute of thanks to those who provided formal, though also standardized, education to everyone instead of a lucky few or the noble elite. But because they were honorary, they were not like those of everyone else who was a normal part of the new organization created at the same time. They could not be dissolved by merging it into a family with rights to claim it either by blood, duel or alliance. That was also why no one had been able to take up Merlin's honorary seat, since no one could

successfully claim it. No one had taken them up in fear of assassinations, something Harry already had to face.

Well, assassinations or rape attempts. Harry's progeny would now be worth quite a bit of political power. And not a few plans were currently being made to either acquire those very wealthy genes, or to sell a daughter or two to him.

Daphne Greengrass was about to get a very awkward letter.

As was Susan Bones.

Blaise Zabini didn't would admit to absolutely nothing, even under threats of cruciatus exposure or the awkward pictures Daphne had from first year.

So, in light of all members being present and no one voting against Harry's suggestion, laws were passed that day, but nothing new could be until it was handled at a future meeting a month later where not everyone had to attend. Only those who really cared to vote, or wanted to feel important, would be there. Or those, such as Augusta Longbottom, who wanted to keep an eye on the things that would be set up for a future meeting so she knew nothing was being passed on the sly. Of course, several would also be there to ensure their vote went against the motion.

Via proxy, of course.

Harry now understood how so many laws could be passed by Voldemort in the future and why the wizarding world was so totally screwed up! Unless it was the mandatory meeting, all an evil witch or wizard had to do was control who actually went to the meetings! Want your vote passed to put muggleborns into camps? Why, just stop the others who would oppose you from attending! Want to sneak a law in that favors your family? Do it during a meeting when few people will show up so you've got the best chance!

It actually kind of scared Harry in a way Voldemort never had.

The inherent laziness of the wizarding world had also found its way into their government so anyone with the desire to actually work for what they wanted only had to do a very small amount of that work to succeed. It was only those diligently standing vigil like the Lady

Regent Longbottom and Madam Bones who kept things from going to Hell in a hand basket. Without them, Harry had a very good idea of what some of the others would do.

Thankfully, every member received a record of motions to be passed in another meeting, so the obvious couldn't be done in a sneaky way, unless you were subtle and built up your laws and means so all those innocuous little things finally became one large, big problem. It was only for that reason Malfoy Senior found himself making deals with Delores Umbridge, passing her registration laws and the now failed tax increase.

Apparently, somewhere around six hundred years ago, they realized they could make it optional so long as they enforced that rule of not passing laws that weren't brought up in a previous meeting and everyone made aware. That way, in theory, everyone knew what matters were coming up, but didn't have to do anything without wanting to.

[Legal End]

"Lord Potter. I wanted to thank you for pointing out that the Auror department was not responsible for the financial problems of the Ministry," Amelia Bones offered as she got close to Harry, with Augusta Longbottom at her side. "For a long time, we've been the usual ones to blame according to the Minister and any attempts to say otherwise usually fall upon deaf ears."

"Not a problem, Madam Bones. I know Fudge froze your budget a few years ago and didn't think he remembered that," he responded, missing Amelia's quirked eyebrow. Fudge had only frozen their budget a few months ago, to be honest. She was unable to do anything about it, but it had been right after Lucius met with the Minister and Amelia had learned he had some incoming wares from somewhere in China. Recent laws stopped her from checking carefully, but he was obtaining a large number of decorative statues that Amelia would be willing to bet were more than they appeared.

"One of my cousins went into the Auror program, so I got curious and looked up a bit. Perhaps you could tell me who I could contact to get a copy of the transcript for the Black trial? I've looked into it as much as I could from my side and there's a bunch that doesn't add up that I was hoping to puzzle out." He turned to the woman that

scared her grandson with a smile, noticing she wasn't fond of being ignored. "Lady Regent Longbottom, correct? Neville's told me a bit about you. 'Stern, but a softy at heart', I think was the phrase."

Harry's grin widened as the woman blushed, even as her face became more McGonagall-like in nature. Hopefully, Neville wouldn't suffer the backlash of that. He hadn't actually said that until their sixth year after he had developed a bit more backbone, but he had apparently always thought it. From a different room, at least.

"I am the Lady Regent, Lord Potter."

"Please, just call me 'Harry'. I don't really care about titles or anything," Harry said, hiding his blush from nervousness. His mind may have been more war-driven, but he still felt a little insignificant around adults that he didn't hate more. "During something like earlier, I can understand it, but I don't really care to be singled out. I would rather just be a normal kid than a lord."

"Then why on earth did you take up your lordship?" Amelia asked, boggled by his decision. "That would appear to do the complete opposite."

Harry looked at the woman with the monocle curiously. "Susan never told you?"

Amelia's eyes narrowed, not being fond of being out of the loop, especially when her niece was involved in any way. "Told me what?"

"I've definitely got to thank her for not talking about me like everyone else," Harry mumbled to himself, just loud enough for the others to hear him without meaning to. "Madam Bones, the relatives I used to live with kept me locked in a cupboard under the stairs until Hogwarts started. That was my bedroom and where my first letter was owled to," Harry said, not really paying attention to the horrified expressions on either woman. "I was worked like a Malfoy house elf, and believe me, I know since I tricked Lucius into freeing his and hired him on for my own home. The only difference is that I didn't use magic and they preferred to beat me rather than make me do it myself. I was fed little and did all the house work."



Amelia tried to speak, but all that came out were garbled words where she couldn't form a coherent sentence. 'This is Harry Potter! How on earth was he treated like that!'

"Now, a bunch of people at school suspected stuff like that, but I never told people about it since Dumbledore was hell-bent on sending me back, so I can understand if you didn't know about that. But if that wasn't enough, each year so far, I've had to go into life-or-death situations. First year, I fought against our DADA teacher who was possessed by the spirit of Voldemort, run from a Cerberus, fought a troll and wound up getting saved by a centaur in the Forbidden Forest during a detention and had to kill the teacher or be killed by him. Last year, I had to talk to the king of acromantula to prove Hagrid was innocent and outrun his thousand hungry spawn and learn some about what Slytherin's monster was before I eventually went down to kill the bastard basilisk and wound up having to do it with a sword because my wand was tricked from me while having to deal with another DADA teacher who seemed far too interested in me and who admitted to being extremely good with memory charms."

Harry pinned the older woman with a strange look. "This year, I've got the man who is supposedly responsible for my parents' deaths, but is my godfather, which means he is magically bound to work for my safety and a hundred or more dementors at the school at any given time, which is, from what I hear, half of Azkaban's numbers which now surround every child in that school. The buggers already came close to me on the train and seem to gravitate towards me. So, I became a lord for the emancipation and so I could use my wand whenever I need to. I'm free of the Dursleys and can now legally defend myself and was able to get an exemption order from Fudge for any of my friends who accept my aegis so they can do the same. I took the title for self-preservation and to protect my friends, not to stand out."

"Why have we never heard of this?" Augusta asked as Amelia was still rather shocked. This was the boy her grandson praised so highly in his letters and wished to emulate? She liked her family alive thank you very much!

Harry shrugged in reply. "After first year, I was dealing with knowing I basically killed Quirrell. All I did was put my hands on him, but whether it was accidental magic or something else, I don't know, he

just kind of dissolved and burned. It took me a while to deal with that and I don't tend to talk about it. Second year, same basic thing. I don't like to talk about it. As for why no one else said anything? I don't know that, either. The students at Hogwarts are really very fickle. They'll be on my side one day or against me the next depending on what's going on. When they found out I was a parseltongue, they thought I was evil until Hermione got petrified by the basilisk, then they weren't sure until after I rescued Ginny from the Chamber."

Neither woman really knew how to respond to ... well, any of that, really. It was extraordinarily rare for anyone to face a basilisk and live, much less a child. The rest? Well, it was a bit surreal. The savior of the wizarding world grew up in a highly abusive environment and, each year since returning to their world, has faced peril multiple times.

"Anyway, I was wondering if I could send you both something to be set up at your homes?" Harry hedged, suddenly realizing he would rather have these ladies' permissions before actually sending them anything.

"What exactly would you be sending us?" Augusta inquired, handling the influx of shocking information a little better than the Director of the Magical Law Enforcement. Susan's aunt couldn't, for the life of her, figure out why Susan never felt the need to discuss any of this with her, or even how much she may have known.

"I've become friends with both Neville and Susan," Harry said, trying to explain himself as he went. These women were sharper and with more life experience and he figured coming from a caring friend perspective than a wartime view would help him here. "In the last two years, I've faced either the spirit of Voldemort himself, or a shade he created when he was a teenager that possessed and nearly killed Ginny even though it was in a book. Knowing at least about the first one, I made plans to protect my friends. There's something ... new ... in wizarding travel that one of my companies developed. The security system on it and the way it works is something totally new, but the long and short of it is it's a portal that'll only work for those allowed. I want to give it to you two to set up and give you the codes so you can use it if you're ever in an emergency. Floos can be shut down and apparition and portkeys

warded against for most people and very quickly. Call me paranoid, but I'd like my friends to stay as safe as possible."

"Mister Potter, Voldemort is dead," Amelia stated with a frown, not comfortable with the conversation. Maybe the boy really was mad? He did admit to living and growing in an abusive household.

"Would you like my memories or a veritaserum questioning?" Harry asked simply, causing both women to become a bit more cautious at his assured manner.

"Would you be capable of using these portals to travel to our own homes?" Augusta asked.

"Possible, yes," Harry said with a nod. "But only if allowed. The security systems are designed ... well, one person controls who is and isn't allowed through, so I'd need permission, but yes, I could. But so far, this is only meant to be used for an emergency escape, so I'm only giving them to a few people that I trust since everyone would be allowed to come to my home when they want. Neville and Susan are among those few."

Both women found themselves confused and more than a little disturbed by the way this conversation had been going. And to be honest, neither really felt inclined to continue it. "We shall see, Lord Potter," Amelia stated, using Harry's title since she was both worried at his state of mind and planning to make a retreat. "I would like your memories, however, if you know how to give-"

She was cut off as Harry reached into his pocket and, due to leaving his wand at the security desk, wandlessly conjured a glass vial before he stuck his finger to his temple and deposited several memories into it. The first was of the day he got his Hogwarts letter, then Lucius slipping Ginny Voldemort's diary even if he hadn't actually witnessed it going in, he hoped she would be able to spot it in the memory. He was glad he arrived after that event in time and hoped it had happened as he remembered in this time line.

He also added the Malfoy patriarch in the middle of a killing curse after he freed Dobby, just in hopes it could put the man in hot water. Then he withdrew each memory of Voldemort: the Dark Forest in first year, the confrontation at the end of the year and when Quirrell was attempting to jinx his broom, followed by each of Ginny's

possessions in second year and the final confrontation with the shade at the end of the year, along with the conversation with Aragog in hopes of getting Hagrid's record cleared. And lastly, he provided his memories of Dobby trying to stop Harry and the dementors getting onto the train.

"Here you go," he told her, wishing he could provide more. He briefly explained what she should expect to find. All his memories related to Voldemort and Lucius, plus one to prove he wasn't lying about his relatives since he thought they looked like he wasn't telling the truth, which he purposefully led them to believe he had misread them. While he hadn't received anything more than a smack to the head during that memory, it was enough to show a common occurrence.

"Er, thank you," Amelia stated, holding the surprisingly bright vial of memories. "Do you always carry a potion's vial in your pockets?"

"I'm on a potion for malnutrition from the apothecary," he told her, not telling her this vial didn't belong to that regimen. "I'm supposed to take it with meals. Plus I ate lunch before coming here."

Amelia nodded as she pocketed her new cargo, curiosity warring within her and making her want to go look them over immediately. However, she still had her reason for approaching him to begin with. "All this aside, I wanted to come over here in the first place to tell you I had received a letter from Susan about the attack on Miss Granger. I wanted to apologize formally for not being able to do anything more than put pressure on Mister Chang to look for a counter-curse."

Harry's mood instantly darkened, his eyes becoming cloudy and the greens looking more sinister, causing both older women to straighten, sensing his magic pulsing. "I've looked into the laws, Madam Bones," Harry stated, his voice level and lower, sounding quite surprising from a thirteen-year old. "She hadn't accepted my aegis yet, so I know I can't officially call a duel of honor against him."

"Lord or no, you are far too young to be fighting people, Mister Potter," Amelia chastised him, sounding more in mother or aunt mode than her legal capacity.

Harry's eyes darted up to meet hers steadily. "I'll remember that the next time something like this happens and hope it isn't Susan laying in the bed."

Amelia stiffened at the unintended threat as her monocle was squeezed in place between her cheek and eyebrow with the narrowing of her eyes. "Lord Potter, if you think I'm going to stand her idly while you threaten-"

"I'm not threatening Susan," Harry stated immediately, looking surprised that's how she took his meaning. "She's a good person and a great friend. However, if you think I'm just going to stand by when someone's being hurt, especially someone important to me, you've got another thing coming. I have killed for my friends and I will do so if it is necessary. In this case, I'm just pissed because all I can do is wait, and it doesn't suit my personality."

For some very strange reason, Amelia found herself soothed by those words. She had absolutely no clue why, but even with his wrathful countenance, she began to trust him. Next to her, Augusta Longbottom was watching her friend and the boy in front of her who was playing as a man carefully, looking for details to share with the other woman later, when she, too, began to feel calmed and soothed by his words. Both women could feel his outrage in the magic that gently washed over them and, somehow, that brought his point home.

In this boy, was a powerful man. A great friend and a warrior. Amelia was quite familiar with those eyes the boy sported. She saw them in some of her best and most trusted aurors. Even Augusta saw her comatose son in them, making both women feel as though they were amongst a friend and ally. So much so, that they welcomed the push of his magic into them, without even realizing it, accepting its soothing commands. Each was feeling the presence of someone from their past that they mourned the loss of, and were willing to accept what they felt if only to remain close to something they had lost long ago. For Amelia, she felt the presence of her long-dead husband and several trusted aurors. For Augusta, the son she mourned for daily. People the two elder women were proud to know and whom they respected.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Amelia apologized. "I understand how you're feeling quite well. It's not a place one enjoys being. What I meant is

that he is bound to have a good deal more experience than you and challenging him is not a good idea. Especially since his own daughter was attacked."

"I've been wondering about that," Harry questioned, feeling like he should already know the answer. Like he had heard it just that day. "Why aren't you able to do something about that? About what happened to Hermione or others?"

"It's not a direct part of Ministerial control," Amelia near-snarled. She did not like that. Not when, as Harry insinuated, it could have easily been Susan. "It is virtually untouchable in regards to crimes there unless it's a direct threat to the Ministry or Wizarding Britain unless the Headmaster gives us permission to enter. But his views tend to lead towards him trying to fix everything on his own and doing so keeps anyone from gaining a criminal record, so he hopes to rehabilitate them."

'Oh yea,' Harry thought sheepishly. He had only heard that a few hours ago.

"So, theoretically, if a person were to commit murder of another student, it is outside of the Ministry's jurisdiction?" Harry asked.

"I hope you're asking for the sake of curiosity," Amelia stated, scrutinizing Harry carefully, "and not in reference to something more sinister."

"It's the worst sort of thing I could think up off hand," Harry defended. "But since that is very thing almost happened, and still may if Hermione doesn't keep getting better, I'm curious."

"Then it would depend on who it was," Amelia stated carefully. "Both who committed the crime and who the victim was. For example, if it were against Susan, it could be seen as an attack against the Ministry to get to me but, for the sake of examples, were it Miss Granger, it would be someone with no affiliations to the Ministry and, sadly, of less importance. It would be like the difference between a murder in France to us. If it is someone there, it is sad, but nothing we take note of unless it is one of ours or our diplomats. Dumbledore usually refuses to allow us to come in to do anything as I mentioned. And we could generally do nothing on our own since

Hogwarts is run separate from us. It is, for all intents and purposes, its own independent city-state, left over from near its creation."

Harry's face contorted into a silent snarl as he nodded, not liking it, but accepting it as the current way of things. As a general rule, that meant no matter what happened, it fell to the Headmaster to punish those who required it. It was no wonder Snape got away with so much! And Draco! It was suddenly clear why he always went after muggleborn in his verbal assaults, and occasional magical ones, as well, but never anyone of note. 'Not anymore. And never again!'

"Anyway, Mister Potter, we simply wanted to know if you would appear next month to lend your vote towards your suggested audit," Augusta questioned. She was finding it hard to get a read of this boy. Something within her said to trust him, but he shifted from one strong emotion to another quickly and without apparent reservation. It was almost painful to watch for a woman who did everything conservatively. He just didn't hide his emotions and it made reading what she was seeing more difficult.

"When is it?" Harry asked. "I wouldn't have known about this meeting if it weren't in the paper, and I didn't even know it was mandatory. I was just lucky someone sent me a letter about it and the consequences of not coming or I wouldn't have shown up."

"We meet the second Friday of each month excluding possible equinoxes and important holidays," Augusta stated. "And we don't usually send letters out since it is considered commonplace, though you may not have received your agenda since we only recently learned you took up your seats." She decided not to mention they knew about the Potter seat and should have sent him the agenda for at least that one. It would bear scrutiny, regardless.

"Alright. I'll be there." Harry bade the two older women goodbye and then left the building, heading to a magical post office in Diagon Alley to send off a letter he had written in the last twenty minutes of the meeting before going to Ollivander's to request some special help, then one final stop before heading to Hogwarts.

xXxXxXx

Severus Snape was many things, and most people would take great joy in telling you exactly which of the worst things they could think of

he was for as long as you were willing to listen. He was well aware of this. More than just a few graduates each year would send him howlers and general hate mail once they felt they were safe from him, never considering he was petty enough that he would find them during that same summer and show them his displeasure.

He actually looked forward to those days. He took his time torturing the men or using them as guinea pigs, and kept the women until the end of the summer, where they would be used for his own sick pleasures before being locked in a room in his basement when he left for Hogwarts to die of starvation and dehydration in a room that blocked magic from being used, just in case they somehow tried to use accidental magic to make their suffering stop or look for freedom. Assuming he chose not to use them for potion ingredients, that is. Humans weren't an exclusion to magical supplies, after all. There were just very few potions who used them and every single one was considered dark for their requirements. Of course, most were quite potent, but the research potential was tremendous.

The man had even taken great pride in learning that a person who died in the form of another while under polyjuice would remain that way. Which meant the magic for the transformation was inert, thus allowing the human components to be used like the original's would, like the person's hair. It was very curious to note that the magic of the polyjuice potion didn't wear off, but that a person's magic fought the effects of the potion, meaning those who were magically weaker tended to stay transformed longer. After all, a muggle woman had taken a week using the same dose as a standard witch to revert back to normal.

Snape had realized he was quite disturbed when he dug up Lily Evans and divested her of every hair on her body. Well, to be fair, it was after he was done using her body, finally claiming her in the one way she would never have allowed him if she could say or do otherwise. As a Death Eater, Snape had done far worse than desecrate a corpse. The fact magicals preserved their dead for burial with a stasis charm made it much better than it would have otherwise been after the two weeks it took to break the safety wards around the graveyard she was buried in. So, despite that realization, he didn't have any problems with his plans.

Still, all those hairs meant he eventually didn't lose out on anything. And it didn't sometimes take the man too long to make those women



believe they were truly Lily Evans, either. He had grown increasingly precise with his methods over the last decade and a half.

In his own way, he was his own dark lord. He had supreme rule over those in his House, or 'domain' as he preferred to think of it. Slytherins knew what to do when he gave them orders, they stepped to the side to allow him clear passage and any of them that were needing better grades in potions knew what nights he entertained his 'guests'. His students knew to fear him, but also respect him. Or else.

Snape knew there was really only one redeemable quality about him. He was mortal. He would eventually die. And he was perfectly happy with that.

But that was why he was working on the most insidious potion he had ever created for his own, personal gain. At least that didn't involve his own gain along with another like Voldemort or Dumbledore. Harry Potter, the brat that he was, had the sheer audacity and nerve to tell him no to his face! He was given detentions and refused to go. He had even brought in other staff to validate his blatant act of stupidity.

Snape was willing to allow him to think he won, for now.

The contents of his cauldron were some of the darkest magics in existence, or would be if anyone had ever known about them before now. But Snape had used his own potions ability to create something completely new and truly horrible. The components were expensive in a way that would have broken most men, who didn't run a black market potions trade or blackmail the right people.

You could get a lot of hairs of influential daughters while forcing them to sleep with you for proper grades, even if they didn't deserve the bad ones to begin with, after all. Toss in a few compulsions to do a single step wrong and there wasn't even proof you lied about the grades and the girls truly believed they deserved them. To be honest, he was quite disappointed he was restricted to his own House females in that regard. He was in a position of power where he had access to them at any time to quell any potential problems and keep an eye on them.

Once the potion was complete, it would be slipped to Harry Bloody Potter and the boy everyone knew now would be a thing of the past within the course of a single lunar cycle. The new Harry would be loyal to Snape, emotionless, feel no pain or pleasure, retain anything he was told or taught and his magical core would never cease growing. Harry Potter would become Snape's weapon to eventually take over the magical world, or he would die while doing so, which Snape would still consider a win.

The best of all, however, was that the conversion would force him to destroy anything and everything he held dear to him, thus breaking all bonds he had to the living world.

Snape smiled down at the boiling cauldron, fantasizing over exactly what would happen and wondering if he could convince the brat to do some truly heinous things to his friends first since Snape knew he would be forced to restrain himself for the foreseeable future and unable once they were dead. Granger had always been rather uppity and never seemed to know her place. Lovegood was becoming more of an annoyance the more she spent time with the group, as well. And it was always fun to see the Weasleys suffer. Perhaps it would be easiest just to sic the boy on his entire House?

Almost reverently, Snape stroked the cases that held the hearts of the elder Potters. "One more new moon, and I can add in the necromantic components to bind you to me forever," Snape muttered to himself. "Then your arse is mine, Potter."

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"Hello Mrs Granger," Harry said as the older woman answered the door.

"Oh! Harry. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in school?" Emma looked about, wondering and hoping Hermione was with him even as she stepped to the side and motioned him in. "Would you like a drink?" She was a bit disappointed to not see Hermione walking through the door with a smile on her face.

"No thank you. I just came by to ask if I could give you something for Christmas so you and Mister Granger could see Hermione," Harry explained. "Someone who works for me invented something that is like a door, but instead of going into another room, it would go from

one door to the other, wherever it is. I'm hoping you'll let me give you one so Hermione could come by when she isn't working on school work or, for this Christmas since she is thinking of staying at Hogwarts, you can still have her come by for the day before she comes back."

Emma smiled brightly. "That sounds wonderful! It isn't overly obvious though, is it? I'm still having a tough time figuring out how to make that library for her so she has somewhere to put her magical things without building a new addition to the house. I've been seeing contractors about turning the attic into a usable workspace, but it would require a lot of work, unfortunately."

"No, but I've actually got that covered, to be honest," Harry offered. "I got her a trunk that has something like an apartment in it, including a room for a library. It needs shelves and furniture still, but I got it for her for Christmas during the summer before I learned about this."

"So that's what you were talking about," Emma said with a smile. "But isn't this a bit much?"

"Nope," Harry said. "The doorway things are basically free since one of my people designed them. I'll put it in another apartment trunk if you want it. That'll keep it hidden so you always have it here. And then with Hermione always having the one I'll give her, you can meet with her any time you want to, or she can come to you. I just thought you might like this for Christmas so Hermione doesn't have to keep choosing between the magical or non-magical worlds and can freely move between both. She could even spend parts of a weekend with you as long as she isn't gone too long. Would you be okay with that?"

"I think we would, yes. Thank you," Emma said warmly. "Would you like to join us for the holiday?" Emma wasn't sure why she chose to offer that all of a sudden like that. She had spoken with Hermione about not coming home during the holiday and, while disappointed, she was willing to allow Hermione her independence. As a mother, she knew it was something everyone needed, but she only wished it hadn't happened so soon. Of course, knowing the boy was an orphan and that he was being so thoughtful probably had the biggest part of her actions. Telling Daniel would certainly be a

curious conversation, though. 'Maybe I should do it just to see how he reacts...'

Certainly it had nothing to do with the idea that she could make this wonderful, thoughtful boy enjoy the holiday in an attempt to play matchmaker for her only daughter. If it weren't for the fact that Emma didn't care for money beyond being comfortable, she would be worried about her own attempts to pair the two off. Thankfully, she really didn't care in the slightest. She had fallen in love with Daniel when he was working two jobs to pay for college and surviving on ramen and bread and the primary reason they went on so many trips was because it made him happy. It was that assuredness that kept Emma from fighting that urge to get her daughter with what was the best boy she had ever heard of, much less met.

"No, thank you though," Harry said with a thankful smile. "I learned from Hermione that Christmas is a time for family. I think I'll go and visit my parents that day." And this time, hopefully Nagini wouldn't be there under disguise. "Anyway, I'll teach her how to use it and you'll get the trunk in a little while. Mind if I use your fireplace to head home?"

"Not at all, go ahead," Emma said, watching Harry leave in contentment, despite his willingness to walk into flames. Apparently, she would be able to see her daughter much more often and that pleased her to no end. Still, she would never quite get used to the kids willingly walking into flames like that.

Meanwhile, Harry stayed at his home long enough to meet with Xenophilius to get written permission for Luna to join them in Hogsmeade, then return and grab his haul of books from the shady shopkeeper, along with the daggers he had obtained, and then wrote a letter before heading back to school. All of that talk with Amelia Bones had made Harry realize something very important, and it was time he took action. Not to mention it was closing in on dinner time.

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Luna dictated everything from Hermione's classes using her own dicta-quote quills and parchment, having freely taken the time to miss her own classes so she could ensure Hermione was fully

caught up. Or at least, that she would be able to catch up. She knew that Harry could take notes as well, but Harry was unable to write fast enough to catch every word and question. And he didn't have a dicta-quote quill. Of course, it was also an excuse to stay as close to her remaining healthy friend as possible.

Except for today.

This Friday, Luna was alone in all of their joined classes. All of the students ignored her, save the girls from Hermione's dorm and Neville Longbottom. They stayed relatively close when sharing a class with the Slytherins, which Luna was silently thankful for. The teachers, while docking her a point for each class missed, were under silent orders to speak nothing of her actions. They didn't know why, and Dumbledore didn't explain, though many were under the impression it was because she was Harry's friend.

Snape was the only one that really had any problems with the order, but Flitwick had apparently taken the man aside and out of sight. Once they returned, Snape was rather quiet, but agreed to the order. That was also one of those things the teachers ignored. Flitwick had been acting strangely ever since that Bolt character had attacked his House with warnings that the man hadn't been able to figure out quite yet. Well, other than this whole fiasco with Chang and her groupies. That he had been unable to notice the heavy antagonism between them had made the short man fear for what else he was missing and felt it didn't bode well.

Most people hadn't noticed it before, but after spending time with Harry and Hermione, they realized that Luna Lovegood just hadn't really smiled since Hermione was attacked. Not out of amusement or humor, at least. She smiled for Harry, and only in his presence, but she was as silent as a shadow elsewhere, and if asked a question, she would look at you with dead, empty eyes. She seemed to never blink and every member of the faculty, save Snape, felt guilty for something and were unable to look at her without averting their gaze. It was like they were looking at a beaten puppy that merely looked back, wondering and asking "Why?".

The faculty learned she wouldn't answer a question for them. She didn't speak to anyone unless Harry was around. After the first day, they didn't bother. She would jot down her own theories and ideas

on the notes she had for Hermione in case the bushy-haired brunette chose to look into them, but she just didn't speak.

It was truly terrifying what a silent second-year could do when her face showed no emotion, but she could fling hexes that made Malfoy more thankful for the Gryffindor honor guard than Luna was. If he opened his howling yapper, it was going to be to Harry, who wouldn't be so mean. At least he got riled up when he called Granger a mudblood. This girl just attacked him! That wasn't how things worked! Where was the name calling? The angry faces and empty threats?

So, for that day, Luna sat for Hermione's Arithmancy, Transfiguration and Charms classes and was now on her way to eat dinner when she saw Harry walk up to the second floor where the Charms class was ending, on his way up to see Hermione.

She was stuck to his side before she even realized she had crossed the distance between them. "Welcome back," she said quietly. "I have your notes for all your classes."

"You don't have to do that, you know," Harry said, hugging the small frame to him. "You'll get in trouble."

"I may not have to, but it helps me feel a little useful. And I'm only losing a point each class. Not even a single detention." Luna pulled back and stayed rather close, ensuring she could feel the side of his arm on her own as they walked to get their dinner. "Did you just get back?"

"Yes. I was going up to see Hermione before I got my dinner."

"Oh. I'll join you, if you don't mind. Madam Pomfrey still doesn't let us in for long and I didn't want to see her if you couldn't, too." Luna resisted the urge to hug onto Harry as they made their way through the halls and into the medical wing. She had been lonely throughout the day and had grown addicted to positive human contact. The fact that Harry and Hermione both accommodated her only made it all the better. She couldn't believe how bad it was when she knew what she was going without. Somehow, the show of solidarity by some of the other Gryffindors didn't mean nearly as much, though she did very much appreciate it.

"You may have thirty minutes," Madam Pomfrey told the duo as they entered.

"How is she?" Harry asked as he and Luna settled into their chairs on the side of the bed closest to the windows so they could see the doors and the healing matron's office.

"Getting much better, finally," Poppy said with a warm smile. "The spell residue is nearly completely faded and I don't have to keep her in a magically-induced slumber. That will make her progress speed up as well."

"Why can't I just flush Cho's magic out with my own?" Harry asked. "I've been thinking about it and, if I can just override all of Cho's spell-

"Mister Potter, the reason you cannot is for the same reason that I can't allow you to sit with her as often as you did last year," Pomfrey interrupted him firmly. "Any magic, even ambient magic, keeps the spell residue from fading as quickly. I shouldn't have even used potions to keep her asleep, but we had no other alternative! If you allow your magic to touch the residue, then it will only strengthen it, thus causing Miss Granger further suffering. It would be like trying to wash mud off of you with fecal matter. Not only pointless, but making things worse."

"Then how do you know she's getting better?" Luna asked. "Wouldn't any diagnostic spells do the same?"

"Yes," Pomfrey agreed. "However, they are not invasive, and I only need to read the magic from her body, so it isn't bad and only a little worse than the sleeping potions. Much like five minutes with a visitor, really. But I'm sure she's getting better because her readings are almost clear and she has begun to speak in her sleep now that I am not keeping her asleep magically. Something about a 'knicker launcher' and whatever a ... 'bikini', I think is what she said, is," Poppy said, tripping over the unfamiliar word. "She keeps asking how it looks."

Harry blushed while the younger girl made a mental note to ask Hermione what it was and if she could get one. Harry's reaction would have been funny if she were more inclined to humor at the time.

"Mm, black lace," Hermione mumbled.

Some primal part of Harry, some part of his genetic makeup and an instinct even stronger than self-preservation, screamed at Harry to club the sleeping girl over the head and drag her to his cave to learn something about the intelligent girls that it was trying to tell him.

"She keeps talking about that," Pomfrey said with a frown. "I swear that girl has a fixation on lace. From what I can tell, I believe she wants to be a seamstress. I never would have thought her the type, to be honest."

Harry knew he shouldn't be aware of that, but really didn't mind knowing at the same time. "So, when will she be awake?"

"Now," Hermione mumbled groggily. She had just been having a fantastic dream where Harry had been tied up and she was finally getting him to tell her what he thought of the various undergarments when Luna's voice popped in, along with the girl where Hermione realized they both looked like the versions in Harry's head and wearing something black and with more than just a small amount of lace that Hermione nearly drooled over. They looked nice on the petite blonde, but she was sure they would look better on herself and had been just about to get them from the girl to try on herself when that reality faded and a new one, one where her body ached, replaced it. 'Ugh! Give me back the raunchy knicker dream and tied up Harry! This hurts...'

"Hermione!" Harry exclaimed, rushing to the girl's side and barely making enough room for Pomfrey to do her thing. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?" Harry paused long enough to give Hermione some water, which she drank greedily.

"Like that bloody mountain troll got me," Hermione huffed after a moment, sitting up slowly. "What happened? How long have I been out?" Her body felt far too weak to have simply been an overnight stay. She felt as weak as a kitten and like she had a bottomless hole where her stomach was supposed to be.

"You jumped in front of a spell that Cho was trying to hit me with about a week ago and have been in the hospital wing since then,"



Luna explained, looking worriedly at Hermione and desperately hoping the older brunette didn't hate her now.

"Oh right," Hermione seethed. "That bitch! What happened to her?"

"Miss Granger!" Pomfrey scolded. "While I understand your sentiments, perhaps you could refrain from such foul language before I find myself forced to report it to your head of house?"

"Sorry, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said, glaring at the girl in question across the room where she saw her laying at. "What happened to her?"

"Someone attacked them right after you were hurt and their minds snapped," Poppy explained. "Now, please answer Mister Potter's question. How are you feeling right now?"

"Pins and needles all over my body, but like it's my muscles and deeper, not my skin like normal," Hermione explained. "It aches, but doesn't really hurt much anymore. But I feel like my stomach is trying to digest itself and my body. I'm really hungry!"

"There isn't much I can do, I'm afraid. Any magical pain relief I could try to give you will only exacerbate the situation and it must finish running its course. But if you promise to come back as soon as you feel any form of increase in pain or if you become tired, I'm willing to allow you to go to the Great Hall for dinner only. You must return right after. You really do need real food in your stomach. It will help in your recovery. Try to stick to beef, sausage, spinach and broccoli tonight. And if we have fried chicken, you may partake of that as well. Your magic will break down everything you eat very quickly to make up for the lack of nutrients this past week, so eat until you feel full, not what you normally would. You will eat at least as much as you've missed as your magic tries to repair everything." She also needed a good idea of what ambient magic would do to her right now and this was easier than casting minor spells around her for a little while.

A growl erupted from Hermione's sunken tummy that sounded more like a dragon's roar.

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After a solemn talk with his new master, Dobby popped into the Hogwarts kitchens wearing wee fatigues that he had somehow found in his size. Or perhaps some unfortunate recruit was currently scrubbing a bathroom floor with a toothbrush for his missing apparel. The elf was in shiny black combat boots, his pockets were filled with only he knew what, he had a field jacket with the Potter family crest on his left sleeve and five tiny wands on either shoulder in golden buttons and his name proudly stamped over his left breast pocket. He moved with confidence and clean movements as the female elves fell victim to an old axiom.

They loved a man in uniform!

Despite the sudden spike of pheromones in the kitchen, and the fact that most of that night's dinners were going to be presented in suggestive placements on the tables and plates, Dobby went to the center of the room and put his hands behind his back, standing at parade rest since it just seemed appropriate and felt right since donning his new uniform. "I is being Dobby Potter, house elf to the great and powerful Harry Potter. Dobby is being finding sick house elves and is asking that they is being allowed to come here to get better soon."

Many of the house elves' eyes went buggy as this elf took his master's family name as his own and didn't suffer pain because of it. Usually, if a house elf dared to do such a thing, its own magic would cause it to suffer pain greater than any spell the humans could possibly conceive of as their magic ate away at their bodies from inside out. They weren't allowed to have their own family names! Not unless ... they were adopted... "Is these elves having no master?" A female elf asked, hoping to draw the uniformed elf's attentions.

"They is having a master," Dobby said with a nod. "But they is being sick and hurt and Master Harry Potter is hoping to help them. I is not being able to explain, but they is needing lots of help soon."

"Is they being free elves?" Another female asked, smoothing out her pillow case robe and trying to look presentable, adding a dash of flour to her cheeks and side of her chin to appear both hard working and cute.

"No. Their master is being ... making them ..." Dobby was unsure of how to explain and disgusted that he had to acknowledge it. "They is being forced to make elf babies without the babies by their master so they is not thinking they can ever leaves." The sudden intake of breath from all of the assembled elves was not unexpected. Ever since their creation, it was found that doing such an act to a house elf was like liquid fire to them. What was more, they weren't the same as humans. When they bonded like that, it was forever. If they hadn't already bonded, then they could never find a mate.

"We is helping them," a male elf finally said. He was Henry, one of the oldest elves in Hogwarts and the head elf, named at a time when names were not the degrading things that many acquired now. "Bring them whenever you is able. We will heal them."

Dobby nodded. "Dobby and Master Harry Potter thanks you. They is being having to go back before students is getting back home." Dobby popped away after obtaining a nod of agreement from Henry.

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"Why on earth are the chickens packed with so much stuffing?" Ron asked loudly, trying to get the leg off of the bird without the insides trying to come out.

"Does this bread look oddly shaped to you guys?" Dean asked, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him. The bread was oddly ... masculine. He looked over to his side where Parvati and Lavender were giggling over a design the gravy had ended up in on their potatoes. He couldn't tell what the design was, but all the bowls of mashed potatoes were sculpted to look like tiny ... babies? "What the hell?"

"Honestly! It-"

"-wasn't us!"

Harry, in an outrageously good mood, winked at the twins as they got dragged out by McGonagall by their ears, wondering what prank they were pulling had backfired on them. When he got to the Gryffindor table with the girls, not once removing his arm from Hermione's waist since she was obviously still weakened and sat

down, he realized what it was with a shock. "Why the hell is there a sausage stuffed into all of the chickens?"

Luna poked at something in front of her with her fork, causing Harry to look over even as she looked at him curiously. "Why do you think they put a banana and two plums like that in the center of a jello mold?"

Hermione had already piled her plate with three sausages, six chicken legs, two beef steaks and was practically gnawing on the bone of the second chicken leg she had already finished devouring. She was extremely hungry and couldn't care less about presentation. She even had a whole gravy boat by her side that nearly got Ron's hand stabbed when he reached for it. Harry wasn't sure if it was her, or her stomach, that growled. The Thundercats wouldn't come within twenty feet of her the moment they heard the sound.

"Better than the prank they pulled on McGonagall," Neville told them sagely. "She bit into her sausage and a bunch of mozzarella cheese gushed out onto her. Covered her whole face. And I'm happy to see you up and about, Hermione. Harry's been grouchy the whole week."

Harry blinked in confusion as Lavender and Parvati's giggles got louder as they looked around, growing with many of the other girls. Then, Harry realized what was so funny. "Oh, now that's just wrong," he said, looking at all the food that was, in many cases, stuffed with innuendo.

"What is?" Hermione asked around a bite of her sausage link, ignoring Harry's blush since she was more focused on eating than looking around. Neville raised an eyebrow as Hermione acknowledged Harry's voice, but not his own or the two others who said they were glad to see her.

"Somehow, a prank was pulled where all of the food is somehow based with some kind of sexual innuendo," he explained, smirking lightly as Hermione paused for only a moment before continuing to eat as she finally chose to look around. "Sausages are stuffed into chickens, mashed potato sculptures of babies, white gravy in the potatoes that have sausages in them, desserts that look like human anatomy and I'm not sure, but I think there's something weird with all the bread. Lavender and Parvati keep giggling at it."

Having finished her sausages, Hermione glanced over and speared Harry's from his plate. "As long as I get to eat it, I couldn't care less what it looks like. Hand me that stuffed chicken, will you? And pass the baby bowl. Dean, hand me that bread!" Dean, more than happy to get the awkward, phallic-shaped bread away got it to her before Harry could comply and yelped as Hermione ripped the larger end off, whacking it with a knife and smearing butter on it. Dean could honestly say he hadn't seen anything so horrifying from the young brunette before.

Amused, Harry handed her the mashed potato baby and stuffed chicken, watching her devour it all. He and Luna working in tandem to make sure she both got enough to eat, and that there was enough food near her that she wouldn't snatch it from their plates. Ron wasn't so lucky and got a fork in his hand for trying to protect his territory. He did get to keep the fork when Hermione snatched up Harry's and let Harry take the one from the empty seat next to him on the other side.

It hadn't taken long for Ron to realize the faster he ate, the less Hermione could take from him. She still had perfect manners, though. Well, at least if you didn't count using cutlery as weapons.

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"You saw it as well, correct, brother mine?" Fred asked as he and George scrubbed the floors of the Great Hall once everyone was done for the night. It had apparently been close, but Harry had managed to lure Hermione away from the tables, being the last there, by pointing out he had stuffed his pocket with rolls. The bushy-haired one wasn't ready to leave the tables even though she was beginning to fall asleep with a full tummy and a desperate desire to sleep warring with her need to continue eating, eventually letting Harry carry her after deciding he could get her all the way to the infirmary without having to cast magic on her to make her lighter. She gnawed on a roll the whole way as she slept in his arms.

Luna thought it was the funniest thing she had ever seen.

"Indeed I did," George responded, trying to get the potatoes from the floor from where his youngest brother had made a rather large mess. A lap was certainly not the best place to squirrel his food away from

the ravenous Miss Granger. She didn't dare go near his lap, but he dropped half of his food on the ground. At least he ate most of it, still. "Mister Potter winked at us, once again. You realize what it means?"

"I do believe it means war," Fred agreed. "We didn't even get a chance to respond back in kind yet, and he goes and pulls another prank upon us."

"No sense of decency," George agreed. "Hogging up all the time and pranks himself. You'd think he'd allow us a turn before going off on his own again."

"Still, it does show he truly is the son of Prongs. No mercy in that one. None at all. His Marauder soul is as black as night, it is."

"Indeed it does, Fred. And indeed it is. But we can't let such a travesty of justice go."

"Perish the thought!" Fred exclaimed dramatically, slapping his soaping brush against his chest with a wet 'flop'. "How long until the potions are finished?"

"Three days, but I think we should save them for a much larger more wide-spread affect."

"Do tell," Fred whispered conspiratorially.

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The next day, most of the school was sleeping in as was the norm for Saturday. The sun wasn't shining, the grass wasn't green, and McGonagall was still hung over from the night before with Professor Sprout.

Mostly a normal Saturday.

Most days will start off normal. A person usually wakes up and goes about their morning routine. They wake up, relieve their bladders, maybe brush their teeth if not purely raised in the wizarding world and they always make sure they're clothed before opening their bed curtains to go take a shower due to a lifetime of insecurity.

And sometimes they don't start off so normal.

Sometimes, you get a cuddly, snuggly blonde sleeping partner in your bed, keeping you from getting up because she lays over top of you and actually growls in her sleep when you try to get out from under her because you're warmer than the bed and you can only hope she wakes up before you end up getting embarrassed for one reason or another.

Sometimes you wake up with a large pile of dinner rolls under your arms in the hospital wing after a week of not eating and don't want to even begin to consider what happened to the butter or why you expected to not be alone in the bed and what happened to your best friend. Along with the butter again and if the two were somehow related, hoping not because you prefer the idea of chocolate, not that you'd ever tell your parents.

Sometimes, you also find yourself being approached by tiny cat fur people who all seem to have brought offerings of bacon.

Some days were just simply better than others.

"Great winged warrior," Twinkle began, motioning his people forward and depositing bacon to the one who had obviously become the Alpha of the owlry. "Our master is your wizard. Yesterday, we saw your magnificent skill at nearly capturing our elusive prey. We wish to speak with you for an agreement in hunting."

The other owls looked to Hedwig pleadingly, each and every one of them wishing to try this wonder that was bacon she had so often praised about. Her wizard was the only one to have ever offered her any, as he was apparently the only one who truly cared for his feathered familiar, and they all wished to partake. Still, not a single one was stupid enough to attempt to steal a piece if she claimed it all for her own.

A familiar's intelligence, power, strength and basically everything about them was augmented by the bond they shared with their wizard or witch. In many ways, it was the same as it was with House Elves. The stronger the magic in the human, the more pronounced and powerful the familiar became, on top of their usual. Add in a portion of mental aptitude from the human to familiar, and you would find their intelligence was directly proportional to the strength of the mind of their human.

To be honest, some of the familiars couldn't figure out why Crookshanks hadn't already begun reading books and discussing philosophy with the humans.

Of course, it wasn't purely intelligence that did it, but the strength of the human's mind and their Willpower. Harry's Will was stronger than anyone else's in Hogwarts. He had been put into a situation to grow up in that many would have broken in. The fact that he had a sense of self and self-desire at all really set him apart after that. The fact he didn't turn out evil just so he wasn't like the Dursleys also showed that iron-like Will. It would have been easy to dominate and enslave, becoming worse than they were. Had he wanted it, his magic would have enforced it, much like it had with another boy in a similar situation that was now his nemesis. And he just simply wouldn't break.

It was for these reasons that Hedwig was easily able to dominate and cow the other owls in the owlry. And all the other familiars were prey to an owl, so they were more than happy to obey and live than not and get eaten.

Hedwig's human wouldn't feel bad for what he didn't know, after all. So it was only prudent to obey.

In a way that all animals could communicate, they began their discussions. "Your gifts please me, Twinkle," Hedwig's low, alluring voice spoke. Had she been human, men would have believed that at least that much of her was Veela in nature. "I am aware you are my Human's creation. I watched him plan your design and saw him create your first forms. He needed something silent and stealthy, possibly dangerous and with decent reflexes."

"My Lady," a male asked, the Alpha male, though not nearly good enough for Hedwig, who denied his repeated attempts at courtship.

"Split it evenly amongst our people," Hedwig stated. "I shall take only one piece as acceptance of our talks. What did you wish to discuss, Twinkle?"

"Our purpose is to be scouts and informants for Master Harry," Twinkle explained. "We are to observe as much as possible and relay anything important to him. However, our abilities are limited.



Mostly, we watch the inside of the place of learning, but our duty is also to ensure we keep watch outside in case someone risks trouble with the wraiths or the dog-man approaches, as we are to help him."

Hedwig turned her head to look behind her, taking in the vast space and the small amount of ice that had formed in the last few weeks. Then she turned back to Twinkle, who simply watched her. "You wish for us to watch outside for you," she said more than asked.

"Hold on, right meow," a new voice stated, coming out from the shadows. His gangly, rusty fur was mussed as if he had just gotten out of a fight, but was simply the usual for him. His legs were bowed, looking a little awkward, but ultimately giving him greater balance and more power. His squashed face looked smug and proud, and definitely like he knew a secret the others didn't.

He was a smug little bastard. Most of the familiars would agree to that.

"Crookshanks," Hedwig glared at the ball of fluff. "Perhaps you could explain what you are doing in my domain? Or why our discussions are any concern of yours?"

The damn feline began purring. "Meow here I was, thinking you'd like to meet me again and chat a little," Crookshanks teased, licking his paw and bathing his head in a manner that suggested he was wholly unconcerned. "Your Human, according to mine, is the one who pressed her into getting a cat, you know. And the way she speaks, she wishes to mate with him. And he's certainly been sniffing around her, so we may be seeing much more of each other soon. Even though we don't see each other much right meow, we're bound to be family soon once they pursue and mark each other. Is that any way to talk to your new brother?"

"Speak," Hedwig actually hissed, coming out human. Crookshanks noted the other owls settle themselves for an attack and knew that, even though he'd escape, and probably eat well, there were too many of the tasty morsels. He felt cats were better, of course, but birds had their uses. Usually as a rotisserie, and he rather enjoyed them with a little lemon, but still. At the same time, however, he knew his Human would never forgive him, and somehow, she'd find out. That girl seemed to find out everything.

"Our Humans are in danger," Crookshanks stated, getting Hedwig's attention. "I don't mean the entire school, at least not right meow. But our Humans, yours and mine. I am here for my Human. And since she seems to desire mating with yours, it seems only logical to work together right meow and come to a full agreement."

"Of course your Human wishes to mate with mine," Hedwig said as if the cat were as crazy as most appeared. "My Human is the most powerful within this place of learning and has chosen yours as well."

"Yes, but your Human is such a scrawny thing," Crookshanks growled lightly, speaking in tones one could almost see a neighborhood gossip using.

Crookshanks blinked as the large number of Thundercats around him hissed. "That is our master you speak poorly of," Twinkle growled, his fur standing up and his ears leaning back as he proudly showed off strong fangs.

"But it is still true," Crookshanks said, unconcerned. His fangs were bigger. "But we are getting off track right meow. I wish to speak of the rat that is not."

"Not what?" Hedwig and Twinkle asked as one.

"A rat," Crookshanks stated, wondering what was wrong with these creatures. "He looks like a rat, and smells like one, but he is not a rat. He is like the woman who had the intelligence to take the form of a cat, but she is still not a cat."

Hedwig hissed, ruffling her feathers in anger. "The rat is Peter Pettigrew! My Human spoke of him often this summer. He is the one who betrayed my Human and allowed his family to die!"

"And this is the same rat we've been chasing that has escaped?" Twinkle asked. "Pitter-Patter!"

"Yes, Twinkle?" The bushy-furred Thundercat asked as she stepped over to him.

"Do you remember what the rat looks like? I would like to distribute a copy to all of our people and the owls. This is one of the ones

Master asked us to watch for, but was unable to describe well enough to compare to the normal rats in the school."

Pitter-Patter nodded her head, nibbling on her lower lip as her ears twitched rhythmically, showing intense concentration and visual thinking. "It will take me a little time, but yes. I may require help in making copies, however. I'll get right on it." She disappeared suddenly, making the owls somewhat curious and Crookshanks to give a kitty-frown. He hadn't tried to catch them, but he wanted to. Especially when they moved like that. It would be more fun than chasing those invisible creatures, anyway. And the other familiars wouldn't look at him funny anymore.

"What did you desire of your alliance, Twinkle?" Hedwig asked, feeling the rat was dealt with for now.

"We would request two things of the owls," Twinkle began, glad to be back to the reason they came. "The first is, as you mentioned, aerial surveillance. The other is part of Master's orders that we are to protect students except those on his black list and since we are now allowed to attack in order to protect ..."

"Yes?" Hedwig asked, curious.

"You know how you're always carrying letters and such around?" Twinkle asked, trying not to show his enthusiasm.

One hour later, the deal had been struck, but not everyone was happy about it.

"Hiss! Pfft! Rewowr! Pfft! Pfft!"

"Ow! Ouch! Oh please no... YOUCH! That belongs attached!"

"It won't hurt for long!" Pitter-Patter growled, swiping at Twinkle's midsection and attempting to maul him. It had been going on for the last ten minutes and the leader of the Thundercats was currently missing fur in several patches around his body, his clothing was shredded to such a degree that he'd be just as covered without them and his tail had three massive bite marks.

"You know we need to be able to get into the air if we have to protect the students!" Twinkle screeched, hopping over Pitter-

Patter's lunge and scurrying away. "You're the one who suggested it!"

"I also told you I wasn't going up there!" Pitter-Patter growled, her ears laying back as she spit out another tuft of fur she had managed to get that Twinkle hadn't noticed. "You tied me to the damn harness!"

"You said that everyone had to get used to flying in case we were ever needed for support! 'No matter what', you said!" Twinkle tried to get some of the others in between himself and the furious kitten in front of him, and not a single one of his subordinates would allow it. 'Loyalty my tail!'

The deal had been simple. The owls would keep an eye out for students out when they shouldn't be that could risk the attentions of the cold wraiths. They would do their best to keep someone informed, usually through the rotating guard that the Thundercats would leave in the owlry who could get where they needed to go faster than the owls could. They would also keep an eye out for this rat, Peter, since he was such a danger to not only the combined leaders' Humans, but to their own Humans as well, for all the other familiars and owls.

The reason Twinkle was currently getting mauled, however, was because the Thundercats would be spending time on the owls with riding harnesses in case they were ever needed from the air, or in case a Thundercat had to get delivered somewhere that their incredible speed couldn't take them.

Like anywhere other than Hogwarts. They didn't know anywhere else. The owls, however, could find anyone, and relatively quickly.

However, another curiously shared trait in Pitter-Patter as with Twinkle's master's mate was something of a problem with flying. Well, she was okay with the flying. It was the falling she had a problem with, along with seeing the ground, not having a seat belt, or being in a cabin, the height, the lack of control, riding on the back of a carnivorous predator that routinely went after things her size ... Being tied up probably hadn't helped, either. Nor the fact that they wouldn't allow her to make a quick parachute.

Of course, the owl had only hopped from one owl perch to another since the female Thundercat was so obviously against flying. No one was sure where she learned the languages, but she cursed them, their ancestors and their descendants in at least three languages in between the hissing and growling.

"Alright, meow," Crookshanks interrupted, moments before Pitter-Patter got Twinkle's throat and after the amusement had gone on long enough. No cat deserved to be fully hairless, after all. He still flinched when he considered sphynx cats(1). Poor critters. "Enough of this fighting. We have our dignity, right?"

The assembled Thundercats, most of which had been betting on the outcome, grumbled their agreements.

"Good," Crookshanks said with a nod of his furry mug. "Meow breakfast should be starting soon. It's time to beg for table scraps."

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"Hermione, I brought your homework!" Luna greeted the next morning. It was a Saturday, but she had awakened at the same time Harry did due to him bouncing or shaking underneath of her. She had at first thought he was taking care of his hormonal needs, but realized it was only his legs. Rather than feigning sleep, she looked at him groggily in question and he practically begged her for forgiveness as he rolled over quickly, pinning her beneath him, and then rushed to the loo where she counted for nearly a minute and a half as she listened to water drain over Ronald's painful-sounding snoring. Rather impressed, she decided to remain awake and join him for breakfast before going to Hermione. She wondered why he mumbled something about it being special as he walked back from the loo, though.

She didn't know he had been awake nearly twenty minutes longer than she had or that she had been resting on his bladder.

"Oh thank you!" Hermione cried out gleefully "I'm not allowed to leave yet and I was getting bored. Madam Pomfrey is great for conversation, but that only lasted for a half hour before she had to get back to checking her potion stocks and her regular work."

Luna handed Hermione her satchel and took her own while levitating a table over for them. "I understand. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Yes. That's when Madam Pomfrey and I chatted," Hermione said, raising an eyebrow at the notes she found. "Who took these notes?"

"I did," Luna admitted. "Harry was quite diligent about taking his own, but he was focused more on application rather than theory and only really kept track of things he wanted to delve deeper into. His own dicta-quill had apparently gone missing at some point, and he also can't write fast enough to keep up with speech, so I used my own dicta-quill for all of your classes while writing my own notes in the sides or a separate parchment with number tags to identify them."

Hermione's eyes boggled. "I love Ravenclaw note-taking," Hermione stated, almost rapturously. Seeing the efficiency, order and thoroughness in front of her gave her a curious tingling feeling she had learned to associate with Harry in the past few months. "Er, thank you. But, how did you get notes for my classes? What about your own?"

"I am well ahead of all of my classes," Luna said, blushing lightly and looking away from Hermione. She didn't feel as though she had done anything wrong, but somehow, admitting the extent of what she had done seemed to embarrass her for some reason. "Harry said you were a bit ahead in your own classes, as well, and not to worry about Care of Magical Creatures, Divination or Muggle Studies because notes there wouldn't be a big deal due to the subjects, which I felt inclined to agree with."

"You ... attended my classes for me?" Hermione asked, finding that somehow endearing. But at the same time... "But, what about yours? Wouldn't you get in trouble?"

"Merely a point for each class missed," Luna stated. "I have earned enough so as to still be ahead for my House."

Hermione looked at the numerous and detailed notes in front of her, feeling a great sense of gratitude for the blonde. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Shall we?" Luna asked, feeling slightly uncomfortable that Hermione was putting her concern for Luna before anything else in

their conversation. She appreciated it, and rather enjoyed it, but didn't feel she was worth the effort or care. Not when Hermione had her homework in front of her to work on.

Hermione started on her Arithmancy work, having been most behind on that than anything else when she went to the hospital wing, but every few minutes, she would glance up, or rather glare lightly, at Cho and her two cohorts. She still found it hard to believe that Cho Chang would go to such lengths to hurt Luna. Or that anyone would, really. She was such a wonderful girl and a great person. A trifle odd, sure, but endearing for the same reasons.

However, the more she thought about it, the more she realized she wasn't actually sure what had really happened after she was hit. Nothing other than the quick blurb she heard the night before, which she wasn't exactly focused on.

"Luna," Hermione finally asked after nearly an hour.

"Hm?"

"Harry didn't do that to Cho and the others, did he?" Hermione asked, looking carefully at the blonde girl. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that, even with his newfound ... well, everything, this wasn't Harry's style. She wasn't sure how she knew that, or what that style was, but she was sure this wasn't it. For some reason, everyone found their predicament 'strange' or 'off', according to Madam Pomfrey when the mediwitch had fed Hermione her breakfast and sat to talk. That seemed uniquely 'Luna', to Hermione.

Luna's quill had stopped moving, but the girl hadn't looked up or spoken since Hermione stated, more than asked, her question. For nearly three minutes, she sat statue-still under the older girl's gaze until finally... "They hurt you," Luna whispered, a shiny tear dropping from her chin and onto her parchment. "They came for me, to hurt me, but they hurt you."

"Luna..." Hermione wasn't sure how to respond to this. Still, she didn't dare look somewhere other than the top of Luna's bowed head until the blonde girl finally looked up, making Hermione's eyes widen fractionally as she noticed the silvery-gray had changed to a darker

blue and tears were welling, making Hermione's heart clench in pain for her friend.

"Hermione, Cho said you were probably going to die!" Luna said quietly, harshly, trying not to cry. "You almost did! You screamed so loud and your body went stiff..."

Hermione knew how much the spell had hurt. She still felt phantom pains when she remembered that event. Still, she hadn't realized how bad it may have been just to witness her reaction. Hermione didn't even know when she had moved, or that she had, until she realized both Luna and herself were trying to hug the stuffing out of one another and Luna's tears had come quickly enough to feel through her hospital robe. Hermione could feel her own running down her cheeks, though she couldn't tell you exactly what was making her cry like this. Whether it was remembering her own pain, or realizing how close she had come to death once again, or for her best female friend whose pain was easily seen. Luna was such an expressive girl that you could almost tell that she had nearly broken that night. "Shh," Hermione cooed into Luna, rocking back and forth with an instinct borne into women, passed down from mother to daughter.

Having been expecting something like this from Hermione, Poppy was waiting in her office with a listening stone, feeling remorse that magic could be so beautiful, but still do so many horrible things. Any time a student had such a horrific event, she used these stones to ensure that, when they inevitably broke down, she could be there to comfort them in their grief once the near-death experience sunk in, and offer the calming draught to help them past it. In all her years, however, Hermione and Harry had been the first two to have such events occur and not break down, but she always stood vigilant. Always ready to be there, just in case. However, with the Lovegood girl there, she chose to wait, instead. It was always best to get past grief naturally, and she was hoping to find out exactly what happened to the three hellions who were comatose. Not because she wanted to turn anyone in, not this time, but because she did take an oath regarding her patients.

"Hermione, you were screaming so loudly," Luna finally said through a sob. "Madam Pomfrey was worried you wouldn't make it and I couldn't do anything."



Hermione ran her fingers through Luna's silky tresses, her eyes closed and mentally trying to draw Luna's pain and sorrow into herself, wishing she could take it away from her. After a few minutes, Hermione felt Luna's crying had subsided enough to ask her to continue. "What happened?" She asked gently.

"I...", Luna hiccuped, "I was trying to scare them to death," she whispered.

Hermione's hands froze for just a moment, long enough to instill a sudden fear into Luna, before they began stroking her gently again, while her other arm chose to hold her tighter. "What?"

"They wanted to kill me, Hermione," Luna began to sob again, not caring in the slightest about what had been planned for her, but how it went wrong and her friend suffered. "But they got you instead! After I brought you to Madam Pomfrey, I ran to them..." She trailed off, beginning to shake, not wanting one of her only two friends to hate her or be scared of her. She knew she would lose Hermione, but she also refused to lie to her. She would never betray her friends' trust in her! Even ... even if it meant she would lose them. She would be a true friend to the end. Whatever that end was.

"And?" Hermione asked, not sensing the full impact of what the story was doing to Luna.

"I cast an illusion," Luna admitted softly. "My mother was a master of them. She would use them to teach me before she died. I learned and used one on them. Their minds broke, if Madam Pomfrey is right. I gave them each a kick for what they did to me, too, after I did that for what they did to you."

Hermione couldn't understand the complexity of the feelings she had as she realized Hermione would only kick these girls for her own treatment, but would nearly kill them, attempt to even, for what they did to her. She could feel sadness that Luna felt she was worth such little retribution, and sorrow that she held her friends in such a higher esteem as to go so far for them. Pride, somehow, was there for standing up to her tormentors at all, even if it was something so horrible to bring it about.

Luna shivered, dreading her answer. "Do ... Do you hate me now?" She asked in a tiny voice, one that sounded as vulnerable and scared as she actually was.

"No Luna," Hermione said immediately, her heart breaking for her friend. "I could never hate you."

Luna was relieved and more than a touch confused. After an immediate hug of gratitude, she pulled back, unable to relish in that feeling as confusion won out over it. "But, but they almost killed you because of me! Why wouldn't-"

"It wasn't because of you!" Hermione hissed. "It was because of them. They chose to do that to you and I chose to jump in front of the curse. You are totally blameless." Mentally, Hermione couldn't help but wonder, 'what is it with Luna and Harry? Do they really think everything bad that happens is their fault?'

Luna's tears grew stronger, but were finally of joy and acceptance rather than fear and shame. She squeezed Hermione hard before pulling back and darting forward to kiss her on the lips, only to hug her again, tight enough to make Hermione's eyes cross. "Thank you!" She chanted in a whispered frenzy.

Ignoring the fact that she just had her first kiss, and by a girl to boot, Hermione held Luna for a near half hour as the blonde came down from her emotional roller coaster and leveled out. "Why did you do something so serious, though?" Hermione asked. "We could have turned them in and just gotten them expelled, I'm sure."

"They had just hurt you," Luna said with a shrug, unwilling to leave Hermione's warm hug. Since it was a place she was comfortable in, and Hermione was used to, neither felt too inclined to expend the energy required to move. "All I could think of was making them pay for it. If it had been me they hit, I wouldn't have cared nearly as much, but once they hit you, they couldn't be allowed to continue. And I was worried about what would happen to them if Harry got to them first, although only peripherally."

Hermione felt Luna sigh deeply as she tried to cuddle further into the older girl. She valued other people's privacy enough to have not asked many probing questions about Luna's history in Hogwarts. What she had asked, along with Luna's answers, were enough to

know that the things Harry had saved her from that year, or that Hermione herself and noticed, was the norm. It was an almost daily occurrence that she would be pranked somehow, and often in a painful way. She had never introduced them to a single person and claimed them to have been a friend, nor had anyone approached them, and she had never once spent time with someone other than herself and Harry while not in classes.

Basically, Luna had been lonelier and had a much rougher time than Hermione had before Halloween of her first year. And while not exactly as bad as a troll, bad things like that followed her like the plague in the form of the cruel pranks pulled on her.

All of Hermione's observations and thoughts about her best female friend solidified in that moment of quiet companionship. Luna Lovegood desperately clung to her and Harry because they were her only respite. The only good in her life while there at school. All of the cuddles, the hugs and bright smiles of surprise when invited to join them, all of the freezing up and flinching in the beginning, much like Harry had in first year, had all been because of her Hogwarts years and undesired solitude. She wanted to belong, quite desperately, but she saw things in a different way than most anyone else. She spoke about things that the general public didn't like, so they ostracized her, not letting her in. Both worlds disliked anything different, especially that which they didn't understand. And Luna always had a habit of discussing fantastic creatures or strange theories from her father's newspaper. Hermione noticed she toned it down now, but she still liked to talk about them. She just wouldn't blame them for everything now.

Hermione knew enough to know that her pre-Hogwarts life was similar, though it was almost strictly the Weasleys that had been those on the inside, keeping her out. Ginny had been something of a friend, but that had ended fairly early, apparently. Other than that, she was alone ever since her mother died.

It suddenly made a lot of sense to Hermione. Luna had been starved for affection, true affection, and Harry had offered it, bringing Hermione along with him. If the reaction of the Weasleys at the beginning had been any indication, they hadn't been nice to her, Ron especially.

Hermione saw herself.

It was an epiphany that sent a shiver down Hermione's spine as she realized she was, quite literally, looking at an emotional version of herself. Until Harry and Ron befriended her that Halloween, she saw herself, exactly as Luna was right then. Pranks from the twins and a few others, nasty names, no one being nice to her unless they were asking help with homework and a burning loneliness every single night, wishing for one person to say 'hi' and smile at her and mean it. It took two months for her, but had taken two years for Luna, just in Hogwarts alone.

When Harry had first been in trouble after coming to her, befriending her, she had set a professor on fire! Luna, when Hermione had been in trouble, cast an illusion. Not quite the same thing, and certainly with different results, but still...

Hermione had, to herself on many occasions, stated she would do anything for Harry Potter. No matter what it was, she would always help him, even if it meant missing her last year of Hogwarts and going off to who-knows-where, she was, and would be, there for him. Why should she begrudge the same from Luna Lovegood?

Hermione frowned, trying to understand part of her sudden epiphany, feeling like there was something lost that helped her, but didn't make sense, but the feeling was fading as quickly as it came, which was bad in the case of a sudden epiphany. Deciding to shelve the thought for later, Hermione leaned down and hugged Luna hard, even using her head to apply the hug from as many angles as possible to get her point across. Hermione accepted her. They were still friends. Luna didn't have to worry.

"Do you know of any way to heal them?" Hermione asked, feeling a little vindictive and not having anywhere to vent that. "If their minds are broken, then they don't really suffer any real punishment."

Luna shrugged. "A mind healer is all I can think of. What I did wasn't meant to break their minds. They did that themselves for escape, so there isn't a counter spell, just as Cho's family claimed there wasn't a counter spell for their's. I didn't really care, to be honest."

Hermione kissed Luna's head, smiling lightly. "Thank you for telling me the truth."

"You're my friend, Hermione," Luna said as if Hermione were crazy for ever doubting that. "You and Harry both. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for the two of you."

"Or we, you," Hermione said as Luna retook her seat, her cheeks pink, so they could get back to work. After a moment, Hermione double-checked her notes. "You said Harry told you not to get Care, Muggle Studies and Divination?"

"Yes, why?"

"Just being sure so I knew not to look for them," she explained. Hermione just confirmed that Harry knew she was taking classes that overlapped each other and hadn't asked about that little problem even once, nor had he tried to follow her that she was aware of. She could, however, remember talking during the summer in his library just before Fawkes showed up that she confirmed that was her plan. But the question then became, why didn't Harry question it?

The girls worked on their homework, feeling much more at peace with things and each other, until lunch, where Hermione was allowed out for no more than two hours. However, after an hour at the table, Harry hadn't shown up, so they chose to go looking for him.

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Alastair, Mad-Eye, Moody sighed, though it sounded more like a growl, as he looked at the paper on his kitchen table. He sipped his pain-relieving potion from his hip flask and burped before taking his eyes away from it and looking around his home.

Well, it was actually a bunker, underground and fortified with every spell, enchantment, ward and trap he knew how to make, along with dozens of fake ones that looked damned impressive, but didn't actually do anything. It was always best to let your enemies piss in fear, after all. And if that was from the disturbing number of protections, or the lethality of them, then all the better.

He had supplies to last the rest of his life here, even if he never left his home again. Food under stasis, books to help his paranoia by teaching him more defenses and ways to kill, and even a top-of-the-

line doll for when he really needed companionship.

You couldn't trust humans, after all. They thought for themselves.

Throughout much of Moody's life, he had survived because he put his trust into others only after a long time knowing them and after they've fought beside him, killed beside him and in once case, woke up naked beside him.

Well, actually, he killed that blighter. One of those, 'if you woke up next to a man and killed all the witnesses, did it really happen?' scenarios. Moody believed 'not'. It most certainly did not happen. It hadn't been an ally, just a prisoner where the intimidation went way off track when the man didn't believe the Light side would do whatever it took to get information out of him. He was wrong and he sang like a canary.

You do what you have to in order to win a war.

Moody was a man of few trusts. That trust had been betrayed far too often, and more often than not, by willful selection. Not the Imperius, not blackmail. But because humans were too damn weak and wanted too damn much. He retired twelve years ago and was happy with it.

But then again, he was lonely.

It wasn't anything perverted. The man had outgrown such base needs. In the past, Moody could spend a month not saying a word to anyone and not socializing when he was on the surface, and he was perfectly fine with that. A month under the surface, though, and he got antsy. It wasn't that he wanted friendship or anything. He just couldn't really stand the silence and lack of movement. It reminded him too much of the 'calm before the storm'. Even though it pained him, he had to get up, move around, and see something else moving before he could feel at ease enough to sit and do whatever it was that had caught his fancy. Otherwise, he would see things moving when they weren't or, knowing how much magic was around him, it actually did move, which put him into a state of paranoia for a few days. It was rare, but all of those wards weren't like windows, but were like bubbles and slightly fluid and shifting, so when they touched, the air would waver to his eye and he just couldn't ignore

the possibilities and had to check his entire bunker for signs of foul play.

Moody glanced back at the letter on his table.

Hello Moody,

My name is Harry Potter. I know you're probably curious about what a kid like me could want to send you a letter for, so I'll get right down to it.

Training.

I don't know what you know about Voldemort and his current activities. And, yes, I know he sort of died when he killed my parents, but he has a way to not totally die, even if his body is destroyed. You'd have to talk with Dumbledore about it, though. He wouldn't tell me what it was called, but I had to fight off a spirit form of him last year that was stuck in a diary. I also had to fight him off at the end of my first year (two years ago) where he was on the back of my Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher's head. It was after something Dumbledore stored at the school that year called the Philosopher's Stone.

Anyway, from what I can tell, he will be back again. And Dumbledore as much as admitted it, without actually saying it. He said he wanted me to 'enjoy my childhood' while I still could.

Pardon the language, but I think that's bullshit, sir.

If I've got a dark lord after me, or if one has any intention of threatening my friends, I will kill the bastard. I had to do it in first year. I had to kill the basilisk last year. This year, I don't know what they think they are doing, but we've got a bunch of dementors at school and Dumbledore seems to think that letting me play children's games is going to help me beat him. Instead, I've managed to teach a few students to do a Patronus charm to protect themselves since no one else seems inclined to do so. A few are even corporal.

I asked Dumbledore why Voldemort was after me and he said I wasn't old enough to know. I think if he's tried to kill me as a baby and I've been in almost a dozen life-or-death situations at school,

then I should be allowed to know and defend myself and the people I care about. Dumbledore disagrees, it seems.

I am writing this letter to see if you're willing to train me to kick death eater ass, basically. I know Lucius Malfoy is after me. He threatened me at the end of second year. I know Snape is the one who told Voldemort the thing that made him come for me that night. I can train on my own, but to be honest, I don't know what I'm doing and I know I need help.

Are you willing to help me?

For now, I'll say that I'm practicing all the physical exercise I can think of, running, push-ups, sit-ups, swimming, dueling practice. I just don't know if it's enough. If you have ideas, I'm willing to listen. If you'll train me, then I'll see what you want to do at the end of the school year.

Sincerely,

Lord Harry James Potter

Moody sighed again. The civilian life never really sat well with him, and here he was, being offered a way back in where he could fight the good fight and take out more of those death eater bastards.

Without those pansy rules the Ministry harped on about ... like 'taking prisoners' or phrases like 'excessive force'.

The problem wasn't in deciding if he wanted to go and train the Potter brat. It was what he revealed in the letter, which was far more than Moody felt he should. The Dark Lord was going to come back. Hadn't actually died, to be honest. And while not totally sure it was to be believed, if anyone could do it, that blighter would have figured out a way.

Now, he just had to confirm a few things with Albus before deciding on whether or not he would accept the Potter boy's offer. He had three-quarters of a year to make his decision, after all. And if he could choose his apprentice, then the stories about this brat's adventures in Hogwarts made him a prime candidate. Moody even considered fitting the boy for his own future peg leg.



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[Author's Note:] – Next chapter: "Know Thine Enemy" - Harry makes a decision in how to approach the war by taking a path that worked for the winning side in the two wars he knows of. And it wasn't for the Light...

This is a third of where the chapter was at, and I admit it's slow. Most of the action will be in the next one, which includes the beginnings of the New War, the relationship is confirmed, CHRISTMAS(!) and the time line forever altered beyond repair. Nearly the entire first scene is from requests to better understand things.

Christmas MAY have its own chapter, however. But, only because of the side-story. If you are curious, think "Jingling Moonbeams" kind of side-story (one of my one-shots if you check my profile.) That, and Christmas is an important part of this plot.

(1) Sphinx Cats – This is merely one breed of hairless cat. I selected it for the magical/mythical explanation, along with the knowledge that "Hairless" cats can, sometimes, have hair, which could explain the lion's mane, in part, when thinking of a sphinx. A simple detail, but one I thought you may enjoy.

## Chapter15 – Know Thine Enemy

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Rating: M

Warnings: Character Death, Murder, Darker Events, Suggestive Language

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parseltongue§

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[Author's Note:] - The "memories" will not be actual scenes, but a brief mention of what they are as though Amelia is making mental notes, but usually in third person. Italicized for clarity.

So, I DID wind up breaking this chapter up (this one is just shy of 30K words.) I apologize I'm not getting through things as quickly as I wanted to. It didn't SEEM like so much in the outline... Next chapter is almost purely the actual relationship and Christmas with a little manipulation thrown in.

ALT Code Test: (1) (2) (3)

Credit Given: Any mention of a "ninja" in this chapter is a near direct, situational recreation (fitted for the HP Universe) from a web-comic called "EGS" or "El Goonish Shive" (NOT Spanish, just a weird name.) EGSCOMICS (DOT) COM if you're interested. Quality starts poor, but gets MUCH better (in drawing – The story itself is always strange.)

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "The Dawn of a Golden Age" by I Am Atrocity (H/Hr, possibly H/Hr/L – Dark Comedy – I highly recommend this.)

xXx STORY xXx

Dobby kicked the bad wizard that was laying on the ground, growling at the man who would dare try to stop him from gathering what rightfully belonged to Master Harry Potter Sir! The green-eyed house elf turned up his nose and sniffed disdainfully as though

smelling something foul, which was actually quite the case since the man appeared to have not bathed for the past few weeks, and then continued to stuff his previous master's emergency money into a trunk.

The men working here were muggles, all ten of them, with two magical guards. Their minds had been shattered and reformed in such a way that their previous knowledge was not harmed, but any sense of self identity or personal desires were totally destroyed, making them automatons to keep track of the Malfoy nest egg, which was actually what was kept 'off-the-books' due to their nefarious dealings that could not, under any circumstances, leave a paper trail. This was where Lucius Malfoy squirreled away all the money he didn't want anyone to know about, even his own family. From here is where he got the funds to pay for his dark items purchases, questionable potions and supplies, bribes and hired those who eliminated certain 'problems' when they became too much of an annoyance.

The wizards that monitored the muggles wouldn't even be trusted except they were from the previous war where, as a Death Eater, they had the option to swear upon their life and magic to do Lucius' bidding and their families would remain safe, or they could instead watch as males were tortured, females raped and tortured, and then everyone killed, slowly and painfully in as many messy ways as possible. Voldemort had absolutely adored Lucius' depravity and, those who were given the choice were allowed those choices while in His presence. The Dark Lord probably wouldn't have cared except he had grown fond of watching grown men cry, beg and grovel. They held a tendency to offer far more after a few minutes under a Cruciatus or after the first violation of their daughters or wives. That usually amounted to spying opportunities when those magicals were either a part of, or friends with, the Order of the Phoenix.

Thus these magicals, that currently feared Dobby Potter more than Lucius Malfoy, had been guarding the sort of money that made all of Lucius' underhanded dealings worth doing because, no matter what happened, he would have the money, free from the Goblins, free from the Dwarves and free from Ministerial control.

And his wife couldn't know about it to spend it, nor Draco open his foolish mouth to talk about things he shouldn't.

Though, since Lucius and those working there who were never allowed to leave were the only ones who knew of the location, they had no need to work magic. It was against Lucius' rules anyway, since he didn't want any risk of someone finding it through use of magic, so they grew weak and soft, which would have been bad for going up against another wizard, but even wizards were generally amateurs against house elves.

"All Dobby did was kick you in your shins," Dobby grumbled, wondering if he should knock the men out since he was going to obliviate them in a few moments anyway, showing memories of Draco and his two friends coming to take all the money. Master Harry Potter did say Dobby was allowed things Dobby wanted...

Money, some impressive gems and jewelry that was mostly stolen from raided houses and anything of value that had been stashed were taken by the green-eyed house elf who, despite what he thought, did not blend in at all with his green and gray fatigues, no matter what that poor recruit Dobby had 'borrowed' them from had been talking about. That was why Dobby had taken them, of course. They blended in.

As the group of muggles walked past, Dobby held himself still up against the wall with his bag of loot over one shoulder and a black scarf around his eyes to hide his identity, grinning as they didn't even glance his way, not thinking that they simply didn't pay attention to anything but their assigned tasks of taking inventory. A quick memory charm, and the grinning house elf went to store his loot with the other goodies.

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Amelia sighed as she sat in her seat, having finally obtained a pensieve from the Department of Mysteries eight days from the day she requested it. The devices weren't exactly rare, but they were highly uncommon and usually, only the simplest ones are found. They would usually hold a single memory and allow a simple projection of said memory, not allowing a person to dive into it to watch it from every angle as the one in Dumbledore's office at Hogwarts could do. Similarly, while the ones you could dive into showed everything taken in by the mind, including the area behind the memory's provider, the projection models only showed what was

in the immediate line-of-sight of the provider. The things they caught through their own vision and acknowledged.

What was worse, for the past week, she and the Unspeakables had been scouring the entire Ministry for evidence to find out what had happened in the Time Room in the Department of Mysteries. Most of the time-turners had apparently been stolen during the last month during the search for the Founders' heirs. When the Unspeakables had gone back to daily tasks and went to get their assigned devices, only eight of the forty-two standard issue, three of the nine advanced, five of the eight extended and one of the two experimental time-turners remained. Forty-four time-turners were now unaccounted for and could be in the hands of anyone.

Whoever had done it had also managed to get into the archival repository, according to the Head Unspeakable. With the massive theft, the entire Ministry was scoured and it was found that a large section of books from one of the upper-level floors had somehow been knocked off of their shelves in such a way as to suggest whatever had caused it had been covered by books and then disappeared, baffling the man. To say nothing of the massive number of books that were there that didn't seem to belong in that section. General checks showed intense magic-use, but no wand signature, leaving the entire investigative side scratching their heads.

There were only a few devices that allowed anyone to channel magic. Wands, staves, focusing rods and specific devices for specific demands were the only things known to them, however. But a wand would leave a signature, a staff would be far too large to hide, focusing rods were temperamental at best and usually only allowed for brute force attacks and those specific creations that they knew of were too few and too specific, oddly enough. They assisted with legilimency or healing and the like, but couldn't do such a wide-spread theft like this.

The Ministry was keeping it quiet, but there was a general, uneasy paranoia amongst those who worked there because they were the only ones who weren't watched or checked when entering the building. That meant this was most likely an inside job, and probably a small group of individuals since no single person could break the enchantments to the archival repository. It was defended by ancient blood magic the likes of which had been outlawed for nearly six and a half hundred years and was, in all honesty, a dead art. No one had

records of it, anymore, and there wasn't a single known person who knew how to break such wards. The goblins could possibly do it, but that was because they generally sacrificed a few of their numbers to make things easier for themselves.

Everyone was suspecting everyone else and work was moving at a snail's pace because people were trying to feel each other out and talk with each other, hoping someone would trip up and admit to something. Turning in a traitor was great for advancement and money, after all.

The head of the DMLE was tired and cranky, but finally allowed herself a moment to relax in the quiet of her office. She no longer had to listen to Fudge bluster on about how it was all impossible and nervously blaming employees for negligence or to the many and varied suspicions of those same employees turning on one another, mostly for past slights, real or imagined. And she was finally able to nurse a bottle of firewhiskey and hope things got better.

One time-turner in the wrong hands would be bad enough. Forty-four could see the wizarding government changed overnight due to deaths or 'mysterious' disappearances. That was why they were regulated and restricted items to begin with and why no family was allowed to keep theirs, officially of course. They could never be sure no one still had them, of course, but there was hoping.

Amelia stashed her booze, not allowing herself more than the equivalent of a single shot's worth, and pulled out the glowing vial of memories Harry Potter had given to her. She was hesitant to look at them, and she couldn't honestly say why. She knew they could possibly verify his claims that Voldemort would be coming back. That wasn't a problem to the woman. She would rather know than not, even if she preferred it to not happen. She also knew he was not likely to lie about this if Susan's letters meant anything. She didn't deal with child abuse often, but enough that it wouldn't be a problem, either.

So, why was she hesitant? She even found herself hesitant to send her niece a letter, asking about why she never spoke of the strange things happening at Hogwarts. After all, something or someone going around and petrifying students and writing in blood on the wall was a pretty big deal. Plus the troll Potter had mentioned from their

first year, while not a big thing apparently, was enough she should have at least received a letter with a mention of it.

Augusta had said much the same. She had never heard word one about this from her grandson, Neville. She didn't know if the Potter lad had been telling the truth or not and other than being held in high regard in the letters she received, both herself and Amelia felt a curious camaraderie with the boy that they couldn't really identify. Merely that he reminded them of someone they respected in the past.

Regardless of the hesitation and feeling like there was no point in looking, Amelia chose to focus on her curiosity, which allowed her to finally tip the vial over and into the stone basin, and entered the pensieve, watching from oldest to newest.

Harry Potter, age eight, successfully apparating from a group of bullies she didn't know to the top of a muggle building. Unable to explain situation of how he got up there to muggle staff at facility and in trouble, backhanded and kicked for lying, Uncle demands he not do anything 'freakish' again 'or else'.

Age nine, turning a teacher's hair blue, obliviators show up moments afterwards, have a hard time setting things to rights, must check their credentials. No apparent punishment. Reversal Squad also forced to calm Potter to stop their robes from attacking them. Resultant paranoia and fear due to attempting to talk with teacher about living conditions and a comment of discussion with Potter's relatives and school staff.

Age ten, setting a boa constrictor loose by vanishing a pane of glass, obese boy from first memory trapped, Harry told he would be locked in a cupboard for two days except chores. Cupboard is apparently bedroom. Signs of Parseltongue. Confirms Heir of Slytherin story briefly mentioned. Prisoners at Azkaban eat better than he did.

First Hogwarts letter. Addressed to cupboard under the stairs, definitely the boy's bedroom. 'Family' freaked out, obvious attempts to get letters to Potter, find out why no one showed up as standard operating procedure for families with possible magic-hatred. 'Family' eventually chose to run to a small island with a shack on it via rowboat. Must determine origin of idea to go to such a place. Money did not appear to be a problem. Determine how Hagrid found Potter.

Hagrid gets Potter, fails to provide muggleborn information package or perform lineage test at Gringotts, Hagrid had vault key. Suspicious. Potter made no requests to perform investigation. Hagrid picked up philosopher's stone the day before the break-in if vault number matches my memory. Suspicious. Potter's story beginning to get disturbingly accurate.

'What the hell is Fluffy!' Amelia's mental eye twitched as she watched Potter and his two friends chase thief after the stone. The stone is protected by pathetic challenges. Who in their right mind provides a clue on how to get past a potion selection? Why provide such a passage rather than leave it as a trap checked daily for target? Voldemort did, indeed, possess Quirrell, Potter also killed the body. Dumbledore refused to answer Potter's questions when he came to. Highly suspicious. Also lied to the boy saying no way to not go to the Dursley home. Suspicious interference with child's summer arrangements.

Crazy house elf is keeping Potter's mail, got him in trouble, will need to remove warning from his record, warning of terrible evil at Hogwarts. Bars on windows and strange device on bottom of door to new room 'relatives' used to feed him. Attempt to keep Potter from getting on Express, Potter fails to stop Weasley from stealing his father's car. No apparent backbone like seen at Wizengamot meeting.

Memory of Lockhart and Lucius, unsure of reasons for it. Attempts to smack Lockhart in memory end in failure and frustration. Visit Saint Mungo's, can't miss him there. Altercation between Arthur Weasley and Lucius Malfoy as well. No charges brought up by Malfoy even though Arthur attacked first. Not his modus operandi. Must not want situation brought under scrutiny. Watch this memory again, pay more attention to Malfoy. Also praise Arthur on his right hook.

Multiple attacks against students, Dumbledore took no apparent actions for safety, Potter blamed for most events, speaks Parseltongue, staff did nothing to stop rumors about him, Potter was an idiot and went to talk to acromantula in their own lair, Faced off against a freaking basilisk that was more than sixty feet long and the lucky S-O-B somehow won and then faced off against another version of Voldemort who gave his given name. Disturbing possibilities due to diary. Not normal memories. Must speak to



Croaker, see if Unspeakables know anything. Lockhart, should he get his memory back, will need prosecuting for attempt to memory-wipe children, especially Potter. Potter actually helped crazy elf from before. Something vaguely familiar about diary, unsure of how or why.

Dementors on train going into third year. Corporeal Patronus! Different explanation than known explanation. Request copy of essay brought up by Minerva.

Amelia came to her senses in her office in the chair, her mind reeling. She immediately sent out a missive to get Head Unspeakable Croaker to her office immediately and then demanded of her secretary to find two bottles of firewhiskey. The conversation to come was going to need it, and there wouldn't be a soul who would interrupt them. Something was very, very disturbing about those memories. She just couldn't quite place what it was.

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Albus Dumbledore let himself drift, his eyes closed and his heart weary as the dulcet sounds of Handel's 'Sarabande' drifting through his office. Somehow, the old man felt it fit his mood perfectly. Slow and sad, but an overtone of continuation and 'the greater good'. That feeling where everything that happens is required, and all will be well that he loved so much.

He had all but locked himself away in his quarters at Hogwarts while contemplating the nature of Harry Potter and the plans that the boy would have to follow to beat Voldemort for good. But, his new attitude and that backbone he developed put virtually all of Albus' plans to ruin. He didn't listen, nor was he trained enough to handle things on his own. He just hadn't the knowledge or experience.

Almost as to prove that fact, Harry had helped in pushing through a law on werewolf registration, something that had been denied in the Wizengamot for years. No one wanted to be seen as the one who showed the prejudice to actually force them to do so. The packs would determine who had done it and many were scared those packs would come for them. Most wished only to be left alone, but there were those few, such as Fenrir Grayback, who would hunt anyone down for it, which was the one werewolf that virtually every member had worried about. To say nothing of the fact that most of

those in that body of government knew that registration was but the beginning of something truly horrible. Harry had simply proven to be too naïve to realize what would come later.

Those in the Wizengamot who hated half-breeds would now know exactly where they planned to make their changes during the full moon. And that could cause a good many possible problems. After all, this was a lesser form of what had been suggested before, which was forcibly taking werewolves to 'experiment for a cure'.

But that was all beside the point. Dumbledore looked out his window into the midday light and sighed wearily. He hated to cause any form of pain or suffering, but as the Leader of the Light, he had no choice. Some people had to be sacrificed for the good of the many. He had always known it. And he had always followed through, though he hated every minute of it.

Harry Potter, was just such a case. And now, so too was Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood and, if he could manage it, Ginevra Weasley, Susan Bones and Lavender Brown. Harry was officially the heir of five different family lines. At the very least, he had to ensure that the boy had one, legitimate heir in order to keep all of the Potter wealth and power from going into the nearest hands, which was a toss-up between the Malfoys and the Weasleys, legally. That basically meant the Malfoys since they could, and probably would grease palms to ensure it happened.

Hopefully, it would also give the boy a reason to sacrifice himself by his own choice, giving Lily Potter's protections to those he was giving his life for. Similarly, if Harry successfully mated with either the Lovegood girl or Bones heiress, then that would add on one more pureblood line to his power.

Albus twiddled with a lemon drop in his hand, finding himself unwilling to allow the bitter-sweet treat to ravish his taste buds. He knew he was going to end up causing these girls great sorrow in the future, especially with the stigma of raising a child on their own, but it had to be done. Their young ages and desires for who they would rather have as a life partner could not be taken into account any longer. There was no telling when Harry would have to die, though Albus hoped it would not be until Harry's seventh year or possibly later. But because it could very well be as early as that very day,

there really wasn't time to lose. Those girls needed to help sire an heir.

If the worst had to happen, then the children could be taken and secreted away while the memories of them removed from the girls in question. Miss Granger was certainly one who needed to be by Harry's side to help him survive as long as possible, and she wouldn't be able to do that while worrying about a child. Miss Brown was garnering quite a bit of attention from the lads, so he felt she would be a good choice since she was the more likely of girls to be somewhat promiscuous if Albus' insights meant anything. Miss Bones would be good for the additional line and the link to Amelia, of course, and she would not allow her family to be harmed if within her power, so she could easily take care of the child. And Miss Weasley was already quite infatuated with Harry, even planning children's names, weddings and even the pets they would have according to her mother, who had assisted with children's names and planning the wedding as the girl grew up. Molly was also near frothing at the mouth for her first grandchild. She'd be overjoyed and, overprotective as she is, would be quite the solution for that.

Miss Lovegood ... Well, she was an easy selection to help with an heir, really. Albus wasn't quite sure he could willingly let Xenophilius raise another child after seeing Luna come into Hogwarts. Perhaps Molly would enjoy another one, even if not by blood. Or the Dursleys, if the wards around the house remain. It would be the ultimate defense from any harm, after all.

Still, this was an awful lot to place upon one boy's shoulders. Was it really needed right now?

"He will not declare myself proxy, thus leaving himself open to attacks," Albus began, needing to hear another voice and talk with someone once again with the troubles his position entailed, and not being willing to allow anyone else to shoulder the burden while he, himself, could do it. "I need control. He cannot be allowed to go dark or fail. I ... Do not have any choice, it would seem."

Snarf, hidden underneath the Headmaster's desk, paused from placing the noose he had fashioned out of the old man's stolen beard hairs around the old man's big toe and listened, wondering if he was finally going to get news that made all this surveillance necessary.

"I cannot allow a meaningless death, especially when it cannot be guaranteed to help bring him back under control," Albus said weakly, feeling tired throughout his entire being, his bones aching through exhaustion rather than age. "No. It would be much better to create life, than take it. And it protects the Potter heritage at the same time. One public heir, possibly with either Miss Granger or Lovegood due to his association, and a few secreted away, to keep them safe."

Snarf looked longingly at the noose before sighing and taking it down. Maybe now he wouldn't be tempted with those lemon drops and he could finally get his face out of the puckered expression it had been in for so long. 'Maybe I'll finally be able to get a new assignment!'

"I wish there was another way," Albus said quietly, finally removing the silencing wards around the portraits to ensure they didn't hear anything they shouldn't and slowly getting up to visit with Severus to see if he would be willing to supply the potions required to help in this matter. The man was truly repentant, after all. He had put all of that darkness behind him after Voldemort's demise when he failed to protect the one woman he ever claimed to have loved. Albus trusted Severus with his life because the potions professor had promised him he wanted to change. Over the years, Albus' trust simply grew and Severus had become his greatest confidante and advisor. Even with all the rumors going about that he was cruel, he had never shown to be anything more than a little grumpy as far as Dumbledore could tell. It wasn't his fault potions was generally a boring subject and students didn't pay attention anymore.

Plus, Severus had the most delicious sweets! Even buying from the same store Severus claimed his own stock came from, there was always just something special about Severus' sweets. And he assured the Headmaster that they were purchased just for him! What kind of dark man could do that?

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Harry groaned in misery after his morning workout, having upped his exercises that day. His body was twitching as his muscles protested the high activity and he panted as he lay on his back, longing for the day he wouldn't have to go through all this. He envisioned a day when he could simply not have to worry about Voldemort, the

Ministry or anything. When he would have children around him and he would be able to spend time with them and be happy. The vision began to warm him, allowing him to ignore the pain. Until he realized the warming sensation wasn't the vision but was, instead, his muscles tightening.

The books had said he shouldn't just stop moving after using his muscles or they could lock up and cramp painfully, but to be honest, he didn't care at that moment. It wasn't too bad. His back and shoulders hurt, his legs hurt and his abdominals felt like they were still trying to fold in half, but he had dealt with worse and, simply tightening and flexing seemed to alleviate some of it.

But despite his pain, his mind was still on Hermione and her situation, which had changed his entire outlook on the war. He had made a decision yesterday and took steps to begin it so he wouldn't back out due to fear. This decision was one that was the ultimate cause of punishing his body so thoroughly this morning. Rather than do any set number for any particular exercise, he instead did each and every one until he just couldn't squeeze out even one more. He did pull-ups until it felt like the backs of his arms were on fire, then push-ups until he couldn't hold himself off the ground, much less do one more. Sit-ups until bending was awkward and then running until his legs felt like Dudley had been on his heels, along with Ripper, his aunt Marge's bulldog.

And then he'd do it all over again, tomorrow.

It was Saturday, and there were no classes, so he visited Hermione with Luna, wondering why Hermione's face was so red and why she didn't want to look at him, thinking it was probably because of the way she ate the night before and then had to be carried back since magic couldn't be used on her. Or possibly because she still had a pile of dinner rolls under either arm.

There, he left Luna and Hermione, begging off and saying he had a lot to think about while the girls worked on catching Hermione up in her studies since she could move about, even if not quickly or with much strength. Then he came here to work his body into oblivion.

Harry didn't want to think. He didn't even want to feel, but he knew he would fall into a broody mood and, to be frank, Hermione in his past, but the current future, had eventually told him off for it.

"Yes, it's horrible that you have to be at the head of this bloody war, Harry!" She had told him, holding him down on the ground as she lay over top of him, her hands on his shoulders and her face inches from his after an extra self-loathing comment while watching the Marauders' map and seeing Ginny's dot, overlapped by Terry Boot's. "I understand this is hard and I know how you are feeling! I do, Harry! I do! Because I swore to you I would always walk by your side and be there every step of the way! So when you have to kill the bastard, I'll be there either shielding you or killing the bastards along with you! I will not leave you, Harry!"

Harry let out a ragged breath, still gasping for air as he conjured a wonky cup, too tired to focus more than just barely enough, and then filled it with water, guzzling it down. That had been nearly a week after Ron left them and both had been about as depressed as you could get after Ron's most recent betrayal, along with Ginny's nightly forays into the boys' dorms and elsewhere. The difference, however, was that Hermione had been the stronger of the two and kicked Harry's ass into gear. She forced it into his head that he wasn't alone, and wouldn't be, and that she was going to go through the same things he was by choice, just for him, rather than because of some stupid prophecy.

"I can leave at any time, Harry," she had told him, laying on top of him after her outburst, crying gently into him as he held her tightly. It had taken him a few minutes, but he realized that the light touches he had felt on his neck were lips. "I don't have to fight. I can get up and leave, but I don't. You may be the one with a prophecy, but the only way you are facing it alone is whether or not you're stupid enough to stun me, and you know I'll find your noble ass and beat you to death, find a way to revive you, and then win the war before kicking it again."

Harry smiled, dropping his cup and twitching a finger to vanish it. He had two memories that seemed to overlap one another. In one, with Luna, they arrived at Malfoy Manor, but had been closer to their goal than when it was just him and Hermione, suggesting something could have happened to end up with them there again. Especially since Ron left in both memories. But also, the Death Eaters seemed to use Malfoy Manor as some form of base of operations.

Harry realized he couldn't let it happen. He wouldn't let that happen. In both versions, Hermione was tortured and he could still remember her screams. In one, she was being melted alive and, in the other, he suspected it was the cruciatus since she was in another room. He could also remember something important had happened with Dobby, but had no idea what. Just that the little guy deserved a pile of socks as tall as he was, and all silk.

Talking about Hermione's situation with Amelia had allowed him to know what he needed to do and the path he had to take. He was going to start the war earlier, and not let the other side know about it. And it would start with the same methods his enemy used, since Voldemort always seemed to be the one who would win: assassinations.

It was really a moment that seemed more epiphany than change of heart. In the first war with Voldemort, everyone admitted the Light side was losing until baby Harry ended things. In the second, it was happening all over again. Voldemort's minions were in the Ministry and controlling things, Umbridge had a frightening amount of power and anyone who stood up to it all wound up dead. That meant something! Other than the fact that Dumbledore was hesitant to kill anyone and wanted to reform everybody, and those who ended up in Azkaban wound up getting released a little while later, it meant that the Dark side was using tactics that worked. So, that meant that Harry, and the Light side, couldn't simply do the same thing again.

Therefore, it was time to work things like his enemy would. Use tactics that you knew worked, instead of those you knew would fail.

Harry hadn't realized it at the time, but choosing to do as much as possible for his workout for the weekend had taken much longer than usual since he was getting much more in shape and had greater endurance than any other time of his life. So, even though he skipped out on swimming, not daring to put his exhausted body into a situation that begged for another premature death, he had still missed lunch, which had begun an hour and a half earlier. The pain in his stomach was a great deal less than the rest of his body, so his mind had just ignored it since it was focused on matters deemed more important. So, that was why Hermione and Luna had both elected to search for him after packing away a few sandwiches.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, entering into the Room of Requirement before Luna, looking at the training room Harry had set up and seeing him laying down on a grassy field, looking like he was staring into the sky or sleeping. "What were you doing in here?"

"Lo Hermione," Harry grunted. "Hi Luna. I was exercising. Just stopped a couple of minutes ago."

"You have been exercising for five and a half hours?" Luna asked, frowning.

Harry would have looked shocked if he had the energy for it. "Dunno. I just decided to test myself today and did everything until I couldn't anymore," he partially explained, somehow finding the energy to turn his head to look at both girls. The pain he felt seemed to intensify as he remembered what he had learned the day before from Lora about his relationship problems. 'Bloody hell! Even when I'm told I have a soul mate, I still can't have that be simple either, can I? Who the hell did I piss off in my last life?' It took him only a second to realize who. 'If Lora had something to do with this for dying last time...' Suddenly, he began to wonder about that.

"Harry, it isn't safe to work your body like that!" Hermione scolded. "You don't always do this, do you?" She was concerned because she could see his muscles twitching and swollen from their abuse. His clothes were soaked from sweat and having been there for nearly two minutes, his breathing was only just beginning to even out. Beside her, Luna's face adopted one of greater concern. Harry and Hermione were both very important to her and she didn't want them hurting at all. Plus she knew how often Harry worked out.

"First time," Harry promised. "I've just got a lot on my mind and knew this would help."

"You can talk to us, you know," Luna offered. "We didn't do something to upset you, did we?" She had been on pins and needles about this since Hermione was hurt. She got attacked because ... well, she always got bullied, but Hermione got hurt trying to help her and felt she was responsible and was worried Harry would change his mind.



"No," Harry explained. "It's not anything you two did. It's just ...," he trailed off, not sure how to explain and not being willing to lie to the girls.

"Just what?" Hermione asked as both girls sat next to him and offered him their napkins with sandwiches. Luna had gifted him with bacon and cucumber while Hermione offered more traditional ones with plenty of vegetables. Well, after they helped him up and propped him against a rock that rose from the ground.

"I have things I have to do, and things to figure out. And I'm not sure where to begin," he said, moving his arms slowly to eat. It was amazing how heavy those sandwiches were!

"Well, maybe we can help," Luna offered gently, looking for any signs of dislike and being relieved to find none of that.

Harry blinked as he chewed carefully before opening Luna's sandwich and finding a dollop of pudding in one corner. It wasn't bad, just very strange. It made him smile. Though he had to wonder how she got it for lunch since the house elves didn't serve it until dinner. "Sorry ladies," he said, continuing the demolition of his late meal. He usually preferred tomatoes on his sandwich, but the cucumber was definitely nice. "I really need to try to figure it out on my own first. I promise I'll tell you about it. I just really need to figure out both the how and the when, along with making a bunch of decisions."

Unable to realize one of those situations was on how to deal with the three of them in any form of romantic entanglement, Hermione felt she had to let Harry know they were there for him. "As long as you know we're here any time you need us and you can talk about anything with us, no matter what it is," she said.

Harry swallowed, staring off into nothing for a brief moment. "And I will. I just have to try and figure out some of it on my own first."

"Well, we just wanted to see how you were doing and figure out where you were. Madam Pomfrey wanted me back soon and I need to get caught up on my homework," Hermione said, wanting to question him about his advice to Luna in regards to her classes, but not daring to draw attention to her impossible schedule. She was simply thankful something had been done for it and that she still had the time-turner when she woke up.

Though she would figure out a way to ask without coming right out and asking.

"No problem, Hermione. But one thing I'd like to mention," he said, looking at both girls with a more direct gaze. "I couldn't do anything officially about what Cho and the others did because it isn't officially my business. I'd really like you to look into accepting my aegis so I can help protect you both while you're here. And remember, you need to do this in order to use magic at home, too."

"I've looked into it," Hermione admitted, "but couldn't find much information about it. That's what I was doing before the Thundercats warned me about Luna and Cho." Sighing, Hermione shrugged. "I trust you Harry. Just tell me it's safe and I don't have to worry about anything strange, and I'll talk my parents into it. I'd just like some information to actually give them about it."

Harry nodded. "I've ordered some for you from the Ministry," Harry admitted. "You should have it in a few days if all goes well."

Harry smiled warmly to himself as both girls warned they'd hug him if he wasn't all soggy from sweat. If he had more energy, he'd have hugged them anyway, just to see their outraged faces. Instead, he took the mature route. He stuck his tongue out and showed them his chewed food as they left.

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Sunday morning, Harry made his way down to breakfast, meeting with Hermione and Luna who had stayed the night in the hospital wing to work on Hermione's missing classwork. In truth, the girl was still vastly ahead of the classes, including the work itself, but Hermione had been frantic, worried that she may have missed something important.

Harry sort of felt guilty for telling Luna not to worry about Divination or Muggle Studies. No information for those classes, regardless of how things were turning out, seemed to be stressing his bushy-haired brunette friend spectacularly.

"I don't understand," Luna said, looking oddly surprised for still looking confused with her slightly larger than normal eyes. "How did

you manage to get notes for those classes and Runes and Arithmancy at the same time before?"

As Hermione paled, Harry knew he was to blame for this, at least in part, so he did what he was used to with Ron and changed the subject. But, not being obsessed with Quidditch, Harry went to the first place he thought of that wasn't a sport, sadly. The only good thing about it was that was something the girls deemed important enough to not come back to classes right away. "Hey Hermione, Luna? What do you two think you'd look for in a boyfriend?"

Brown and silvery-blue eyes looked at Harry in shock, not having expected anything like that to come from him so randomly. Harry tried to ignore their stares as he sat down uncomfortably. It probably wasn't the best approach, but it kept Hermione's secret safe for a little while longer and, sadly, he was desperate for a way to fix what he had heard from Lora. And a part of that, he felt, would only be solved by finding out that Luna really would care for him, even if just in basic principle.

"Where did that come from?" Hermione asked while Luna shoved half a banana, some blueberries and a quarter of a lemon into her cup of milk to make some Fruit Smash. Regardless of what Harry's motivations or thoughts, she was thankful it pulled attention away from her schedule. 'How did we think we could hide this for so long? Sure, Ron only questions it when it's brought up around him, but Luna cares enough to pay attention and ... I really don't know about Harry. He's always the one drawing attention away from when we...' Suddenly, Hermione realized that Harry did draw attention away from her schedule every single time it came up. Only once had she ever had to do it herself, and that was when he wasn't around and Ron caught her doing the same work Harry was assigned for a class they didn't share. Even the very first day...

"What? Two of my best friends are pretty girls and you think I wouldn't notice?" Harry asked before mentally wincing. 'Just great! The last thing I need to do is sound like I'm flirting with both of them!' He failed to notice Hermione's calculating gaze, wondering both at his odd behavior over the school year in regards to her schedule, and now that he mentioned his apparent physical attraction to their appearances, his odd behavior since summer in relation to how he spoke and interacted with any female that she could remember.

In short, she was confused.

Luna drank slower than she was making it look, hoping to hide her blush behind the cup and wondering if Harry had heard her a few nights ago telling him she was in love with him. She hoped not. She couldn't live with herself if she was responsible for somehow stopping Harry and Hermione from getting together. It was obvious the two cared for one another and, as much as she wanted him to care for her as she did him, she would never allow herself to be a threat to that. After all, she had only really spoken with him for three months. While she was sure she loved him, she knew it wasn't likely that it was deep or as real as she thought it felt. She couldn't ruin what the other two shared for something that probably wasn't ever going to be as complete as their own affections.

'They're my friends,' Luna thought to herself, reaffirming her decisions. 'I'm not worth the trouble of breaking the two of them apart when they go together so much better. I can be happy just being by their side and remaining their friend. I can't ever lose that.'

Finally setting her drink down and ignoring her new pale blue mustache from the fruit smash, she looked to Harry. "Daddy always said he married his best friend. That Mother was someone he could share everything with and was happy and content to just be near every day. He also said that it was important that, if they argue, they were willing to discuss their views calmly and that they only ever raised their voices if the situation called for it, but that it never would because they were willing to work on things. Well, except for when she was giving birth to me," Luna said with a frown. "Daddy said she tried to turn him into something called a eunuch and yelled at him for three straight hours saying how she was going to turn dark just so she wouldn't feel bad for turning him into a woman and making him give birth. Do you happen to know where the bacon is today? I don't see a single piece."

Hermione couldn't help it. She laughed loudly as Luna described a very highly amusing scene; one that her mother had described to herself when telling embarrassing family stories. It was a mother thing.

"Hermione, do you know what a eunuch is?" Luna asked curiously, stopping the brown-haired girl's laughter abruptly so she could stare in horror at the younger blonde. "Daddy wouldn't tell me and he

removed all references to it in our books and made me promise not to look it up while at Hogwarts, so when everyone laughs, I think I am missing a part of the humor. However, he never said I couldn't ask, so long as I didn't ask a male. He said it would make them quite uncomfortable."

Harry stayed far away from the sausages today.

"Er, I'll tell you later," Hermione eventually croaked out, getting a pleased smile from Luna. "But, er, my parents sort of said the same thing, though my mother's most recent version of that talk was a little more ... focused."

"How do you mean?" Harry asked, deciding on eggs. Had he paid more attention in biology class, he'd have probably stayed away from those during the discussion, too.

Hermione was not willing to tell Harry he had only caught the first of three very pointed talks with her mother. Therefore, she simply did what made the most sense: she ignored him. "But, I think my parents described it a little differently. Basically, if you can't be a good friend, then you can't hope for more from a deeper relationship. A good, solid friendship is like the foundation that you'd built a romantic relationship on top of."

"Like you and Ronald?" Luna asked, getting two very strange looks from her friends. "Oh, no! Not as good friends, but that's what I mean. You two argue all the time about the smallest and most inconsequential of things and he is always trying to get you to do his homework and seems to hold little regard for anything muggle if there is a wizarding variation unless it's food. That would be a bad foundation for a relationship, yes?" Luna felt it was only proper to try and help Hermione and Harry along if she could. And simply put, she felt scared that Harry may have heard her, at least in some part, and that she was somehow responsible for this discussion.

"Yes, that makes sense," Hermione said, nodding slowly as she considered it, unconsciously taking the subtle advice and placing Ron in the 'friend only' category in her mind. "We really do fight a lot, and usually over his work, my cat or general culture differences between magical and muggle society. Or just what we do for fun. Or studying for the future. Or dietary habits since he never eats enough vegetables. Or ... well, I suppose a lot of things, really."

Luna nodded, having seen quite a bit of that, though little in the way of the stories she heard about. It seemed they argued less this year than the past two, but it was also heard to be said that Harry and Hermione spent less time directly with Ron, too. Since Harry spent more time studying and on his own, Ron wanted less to do with him and Hermione, even more so after getting Luna to join them. Still, playing matchmaker, a girl couldn't stop to think about the one not involved.

"Another thing that Daddy hasn't really discussed with me, but that I've learned while growing up and putting things together is that dating is simply what we once call 'Courting'. People in the past didn't simply date for the sake of it, but courted one another for the sake of finding a partner to share their life with, right?"

"Yes," Hermione said, sounding intrigued on where this was going while Harry found it to be all totally new information. He wasn't very fond of courts. This 'courting' sounded like a long, drawn out and possibly dangerous thing to him. "Dating like we do now would probably be not only frowned upon even possibly a hundred years ago, and further back, it would be considered even worse, scandalous."

Luna nodded, giving up on looking for any of the missing bacon and instead getting eggs and potatoes, trying to make a tiny house out of it so she can play the part of the natural disaster later. "That means that when you date, you should be looking for a life partner. Someone to share in your future and be a part of it later. So, I think that I would want to be sure it was someone I knew could do that. So, it should be someone I can be a good friend with instead of someone who can simply make me happy for a short time before they're gone."

"I can agree with that," Hermione stated, looking somewhat approvingly at the younger girl. She hadn't thought on it like that, and decided to share her own, personal views. "But, that is what dating has become for this day and age. It's simply become less socially strict because society, as a whole, has loosened up a bit. At least the muggle world. The wizarding one seems to be a little behind the times there, too. But we still court, just a little differently. We date a person to get to know them and learn about them to decide if they are worth spending the rest of our lives with."

Luna smiled warmly on the outside, while on the inside, she felt like giving an evil little smirk as her plans came together. "I think I would rather see if we can be friends, first. By doing so, we can be sure that we have enough in common to enjoy each other's company without all the hassle of what dating or courting would entail. If the other person can't handle simply being friends and instead wants what comes from dating these days without waiting, then that is a very serious sign of something I want nothing to do with, I would think." It was also how she handled her friends in the past at Hogwarts. Those who wanted to drag her along for various things were pretty much putting up a red flag of warning that had kept the quirky girl from some of her harsher pranks.

Hermione once again found herself nodding, seeing Luna's point. She still felt dating could be okay, but a girl would simply have to watch how fast the guy would want to take the relationship. At least in regards to her. She never had any intentions, whatsoever, of being easy to seduce or quick to shag, though it was how society saw premarital sex that defined the majority of dating. But then again, she didn't think it was a big deal so far. She had done well enough without those things, even if she did know the joys it could bring. She decided she much preferred to think of dating as courting, as well. She may not care about sex before or after marriage, but she'd never sleep with someone she didn't think could work out long term. It seemed that was exactly what Luna was saying, at least in part, and if she were honest, Hermione could agree with that. She rather disliked the idea of being judged and hurt from it for now, anyway. "I guess I can see that."

"So, it would instead be better if friends as good as you and Harry were to get together? You are both good, dependable friends, respect each other and can simply sit and do your own things while in each others' presence and remain happy." Luna smiled as if her argument was over and the two blushing and nervously shifting Gryffindors were already together. Hopefully, she got her point across. It was difficult for her, since she thought in pictures and emotions, to get her thoughts across in speech, sometimes.

"But what if there were, say, two people who more than met what you thought were qualities you looked for in a partner?" Harry asked, wondering if perhaps Lora had been wrong and Luna wasn't actually thinking of him romantically. Why would she suggest him with

another girl if that were the case? Maybe he was stressing over all of this for nothing. Though, if he were honest, both girls did meet the requirements for what he wanted in a girlfriend. "Even if your requirements for what you thought were perfect were few and extremely picky, but each very important, and not just one person meets them? What if, hypothetically speaking, there are two girls people that you think would be great and are what you want?"

"I suppose it would depend on who meets those qualities the most," Hermione suggested, wondering what was on Harry's mind. All thoughts of her schedule and Harry's odd behavior in regards to it were long gone and she was suddenly curious about everything being discussed right then. Harry didn't really spend time with any other girl exclusively. He spent all of his time with both herself and Luna. At least, as far as she knew. Granted, there was the time she was petrified and the last few days while under Madam Pomfrey's care that someone could have come in, but Harry wouldn't get that attached to someone that quickly. She knew him far too well to see that happening.

"How could someone meet requirements more than someone else?" Harry wondered with a frown. "I mean, honesty, kind, caring, intelligent, open-minded; these are things I'd look for, for instance, but either someone meets them or they don't."

"It shouldn't just be yes or no," Hermione said, shaking her head gently. "It's the whole package. All of it along with the personality and everything that makes that person who they are. I mean, there are a lot of guys in Hogwarts, but I wouldn't dream of dating hardly any of them. I don't like to think of myself as shallow or above anyone, but I do think I should have high enough standards to be happy. They've got to be fairly intelligent so I don't feel like I'm speaking with a retarded spider monkey, they've got to be open to the muggle world and willing to be comfortable in it, a decent and good person and they definitely have to respect me. The respect bit, sadly, removes a very large portion of the school populace, if we're going to be honest. But that's pretty much what friendship brings. So, I suppose I see Luna's point."

Luna smiled winningly as she devoured the sausage-people from her egg and hash house. She even ate the pet toast-cow.



'That doesn't really help me at all,' Harry thought as he ate his food, the three teens falling into a comfortable silence. 'So, if I apply what I look for in a girl like I did with Hermione to Luna, I get a possible partner out of it. And, I'll admit that Lora was right. I did have some feelings for Luna last time, and they did carry over. If I'm honest, that's where my need to help her out and protect her came from. I didn't realize how I really felt until we were on the hunt for the horcruxes since Ginny was with Terry or Dean most nights and Hermione was so weird about Ron and hot or cold. I just thought it was guilt for how I treated her but, if I'm honest, I really appreciated her. I just didn't show it the way I should have.'

The Great Hall, the general noise of the room and pretty much everything, seemed to fade for Harry as he ate mechanically, not really thinking about it, and focused his thoughts instead on what he learned from Lora and his own feelings.

'I can admit that I fancy Luna, much like Hermione, but I also know I'd never cheat on Hermione if she was willing to be my girlfriend. But, whether I fancy Luna or not, I can't just abandon her friendship or it'd break her spirit entirely! Even I can tell she's grown to love having friends and I won't leave her. I even promised her I'd never leave her alone again! How can Lora expect me to just abandon my friends like that?'

Owls flew through the windows, dropping off mail to the various students and distributing the Daily Prophet to those who held subscriptions. Harry still saw nothing of it, even as the noise dropped considerably as the headlines were noticed and in the cases of a few students, reception of letters from their family Head.

'I guess it really boils down to what Lora said about Luna not being willing to break Hermione and I up,' he considered, a nagging feeling at the back of his neck like he was being watched being ignored for the moment. 'Lora said Luna would stick by us and be happy for us, but miserable on the inside and get reckless in fights. That could also be what she is trying to do here, now that I think about it. I would see about setting her up with Neville or Ron – well, maybe not Ron. I could never do that to her – so she doesn't feel left out, but Lora said as long as she was my friend, she would never be attracted to anyone else. How can I possibly help her without hurting her?'

Suddenly, the feeling of being watched was too much to ignore, so Harry zoned back in and looked around, seeing several faces looking at him in shock, wonder and awe. Frowning, he looked down at himself and then back around, wondering what had happened this time. "Did the twins get me or do I have something on my face?" He asked, turning to Hermione. Rather than respond, she slid her Daily Prophet to him, letting him see for himself. Her apologetic look did not make him feel better.

Five Lordships, One Boy-Who-Lived!

By Rita Skeeter

Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to Lord Harry James Potter, also known as Lord Gryffindor, Lord Ravenclaw, Lord Slytherin and Lord Hufflepuff? Yes, that's right! Our own Boy-Who-Lived is a direct blood descendant of all four houses. How, you may ask, can that be when his mother, Lily Potter-nee-Evans, was a muggleborn witch? Believe it or not, she was the descendant of Salazar Slytherin and Helga Hufflepuff. The Ministry's archival records have proven this.

"Of course I knew," stated Minister Fudge. "Why, we discussed it the morning of the Wizengamot meeting. Lord Potter knows he can come to me whenever he needs and I've always got time to help those who need it! Why, with Black on the loose and known to be hunting the boy, he even used his power to protect several of his friends after getting my permission. If Black were to go after the boy now, he'll find Lord Potter and those under his aegis are exempted from the various underage decrees and quite able to protect themselves! Let's see if that murderer can handle Lord Potter now!"

Harry felt himself wanting to growl at the Minister for revealing those exemptions. All that blustering and wanting to look like he was chummy with Harry made the man reveal something that was probably going to get him hit with flak from the Weasleys and ... well, any student unable to get exemptions, really. Harry could admit it wasn't fair, but there wasn't much choice in the matter. They really needed that ability to defend themselves. Just not from Sirius. Harry hoped it wouldn't get worse, but it really, really did.

Since the founding of Hogwarts, all four of the Founders' blood have never been acknowledged as living in the school at any one time,

and certainly no one has actually taken up the lordships. What does this mean for Hogwarts now? I'll tell you!

Through exhaustive research for my dear readers, I've learned that Hogwarts itself belongs to Lord Potter, as does Hogsmeade, the forest surrounding the school and a large amount of land around that. As it belonged to Lord Potter's ancestors before the Ministry was created and all of magical Britain fell under the authority of the Ministry, it was its own, independent land that, to this day, is still governed by the ruling Lord, in this case, Potter.

Harry clenched his teeth, doing his best to ignore the very loud rise in volume, the furious whispering and the many, many eyes he knew were locked onto him right then. It would appear Miss Skeeter had elected to go into bug form when Fudge was given his report that validated Harry's story. At least, that was all he could think of, unless she parted with a decent amount of gold as he had for the same information. All he needed was for Snape to think he was right the entire time he said Harry ran about the school, lording over it as if he owned it. This would make the cantankerous bastard even worse, he was sure of it. But sadly, it didn't end there.

My dear readers, this actually means that all that belongs to Hogwarts, belongs to Lord Potter; a thirteen-year old boy who was unaware of his magical heritage until he was eleven years old and given his Hogwarts letter like any other muggleborn. But if you think it ends there, you'd be mistaken.

Lord Potter is also the de facto leadership of the school. Even the Headmaster's authority pales in comparison to that of Lord Potter's, who legally has total authority for the castle. And because, as stated earlier, it is outside of the Ministry's control, it is like a foreign land. Lord Potter can make his own rules and enforce them as he pleases.

What does this mean for your children? It means that they must, officially, obey his laws if they choose to remain there. The Board of Governors, as I'm sure many of you are aware, was created to oversee the running of the school and ensure it remained up to standards to keep it the best magical school in the world and functioned like a middle man between the Ministry and the School. With Lord Potter's return, he could simply dissolve the Board, thus reigning over the castle like a dictator.

I have much more information, dear readers. I shall endeavor to work hard and confirm more of my information to tell you everything, so keep a look out in future editions!

For Wizengamot voting results, see pg 12

Laws passed in last session, see pg 13

Potter Family Tree, see pg 21

Harry closed and folded the Daily Prophet, feeling so angry with Skeeter's usual dark spin that he was shaking. Rather than say anything meaningful and being done with it, the crazy bat had decided to put it all in a bad light as though he were some evil bastard who was going to force the girls to his bed at night and cast them away in the morning or set up a power block at the castle and rule them all as the first stages to becoming a dark lord.

The worst part, of course, was the fact that it was all true, meaning he could bluster and rage all he wanted, but the woman had not truly done anything wrong. He had no idea how she found out about most of it, primarily him not knowing about the magical world, but felt it was similar to them knowing about his appearance. He was supposed to be hidden away, but everyone knew about his scar, his glasses and to be frank, the drawn pictures in the books written about him looked very accurate.

"Is – Is it true, Harry?" Neville asked, gesturing to the paper as everyone else quieted. The silence was actually very awkward.

"Yes," Harry sighed.

"H-Harry, do you realize what that means?" Neville asked, wide-eyed. "You're like the magical version of royalty! The Founders have been idolized and deified almost like Merlin!"

"I'm just Harry, Neville," Harry said, getting up and leaving the table. "Just Harry," he whispered to himself, ignoring the eyes that followed him out the door. He knew Hermione and Luna had risen to follow him, but he couldn't find it in him to accept or deny their imminent comfort.

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Emma Granger sat in a lounge chair in the back of Harry's manor house, gazing up at the cloudless sky and thinking about her life right then. She was unsure of what they were originally meant for, but she had alighted what looked like an open fire pit that was behind her a few feet for the added warmth, unaware that she was sitting in a ritual circle designed for Rites. All she really knew was it was quiet, dark since the fire was a deep red that didn't really cast much light, and she had a clear view of the sky. Harry's tour of the grounds had shown it to her and Hermione had commented on it, though Emma honestly couldn't remember much of the subject matter. Only that it somehow related to the seasons changing and the lunar cycles.

Once a month, she and Dan spent a full day apart from one another, doing whatever struck their fancy, be it shopping, sports, going to the pub, visiting friends or just lounging in the house and doing nothing for the day. In an attempt to maintain a healthy relationship once they began living together, they had agreed that one full day a month was spent apart so they could do the things they wanted to without worrying about dragging the other along. Mostly because Dan enjoyed bowling and Emma had a rather strong weakness for quiet and solitude, away from the city and everyone as fully as possible, something that had been her habit since she could crawl and would hide away in cabinets under sinks or counter tops.

To that end, Harry's offer of the use of his home was perfect. There were absolutely no near-by cities or sources of light that made looking at the sky a truly breathtaking sight to behold. The fact that it was not a full moon and further from earth at the time ensured its light didn't detract from the wonderful sky.

Emma cradled a mug of hot chocolate in her hands, something Hermione introduced her to rather than the powdered cocoa the Granger family was used to, to feel closer to her daughter as she reflected.

The elder Granger woman sighed wistfully. She couldn't believe how one person could be introduced to her life indirectly and manage to change so much of it. Harry Potter brought out a spark of life that Emma could honestly say she had never really seen in her daughter before. She ... well, she radiated the sort of energy only a woman in love could create. Whether it was the forever-after kind of love, or a

simple school crush that would simply last for however long was yet to be seen, but since Harry had come into the picture, Hermione had simply held more life within her. It was viewable in their letters and more recently, in their daughter, herself. This last summer had shown Hermione to have an aura in her that simply radiated happiness and contentment that had easily affected her parents.

Just through acquaintance, Harry had even managed to bring something back between her and Dan in the last few months due to the developing feelings Emma had played witness to, not to mention the ridiculously romantic conversation between him and her daughter.

When Emma had met Dan, she was more into women than men. It wasn't really a matter of attraction as it was choice. She grew up with nothing but girls as neighbors and had taken to explorations with her best friend, Emily, when they were six. By the time she was ten, she was comfortable with women and it simply continued on.

Emma hadn't been lying to her daughter, would never dare do so, when she said she had two girlfriends when she was fourteen. Emily was still there, along with a woman named Cherie, who had been from Paris. Where Emma was not strictly focused on women, those two were, and continued to see each other after Emma left when she was sixteen with her family from Oakham to Kensington.

She had remained single until she started college, where she had met Rebecca. Rebecca had been her dorm mate and the two had shared a lot, including their histories. After a few months, they had become closer and took their college frustrations and loneliness out on each other with a passionate romance that was more friends with benefits in nature than love.

Then Emma had met Dan while in classes for dentistry where they were lab partners for the year. The man had been as shy as it was possible to get. From Hermione's letters, she would relate him to a first-year Neville Longbottom, only without the stuttering.

Four months after becoming partners, she and Rebecca had initiated him into their unique relationship. She would probably not tell her daughter this, but it was one reason to watch what you drank after celebrating important tests. All three had woken up with hangovers and lacking all clothing and regrets. The following few

years had followed suit until life got in the way and Dan and Emma chose to see each other more seriously. Rebecca had, by that point, just finished her law degree and was working with a private firm where she was gone as often as not. She would come home to Dan and Emma and share their bed and their life until called away again.

Dan and Emma had decided to get married, with Rebecca's blessing since both considered her a part of the relationship even if she felt it was more convenience than love. Neither felt she was being honest, but agreed to her wishes. Hermione came two years later.

Hermione's birth had not been a simple thing. For several hours, nearly a full day, the girl just did not want to come out. After fourteen hours, and no sign of the daughter-to-be, the doctor had finally decided upon a Caesarean section, worrying that Emma wouldn't be able to keep up the work required since the baby just did not want to come and the mother was tiring. Emma had been very weak and her body had been in a delicate state for nearly two months after, which the doctors had not been able to explain.

It hadn't been until Hermione was seven months that either she or Dan had felt comfortable enough to begin getting intimate again. Hermione's first birthday had been the first time they had finally had sex again. They had gone so long without that they had nearly forgotten about it. Or at least, they never brought it up. Emma had honestly been worried by that point that Dan would find her less of a woman, but Hermione's birthday had been the turning point.

Though scared to be with him for some reason she had never really been able to understand, though she always remembered the pain and the weakness from Hermione's birth, and not willing to ever discuss it with anyone, she had finally decided to just do it. So, she tied him up and had her way with him.

He hadn't stopped that infernal grinning for three weeks.

Then came the first miscarriage. Three months after Hermione's first birthday.

Then the second.

Emma's eyes watered, hot tears trailing down her cheeks as she remembered the agonizing despair she had felt during that time.

Like she wasn't a woman any longer. That those lost babies were her fault. Dan had been supportive and did his best to comfort her, but she knew what was happening. His job was to start things and hers to nurture the result. She tried to explain this to him, but he refused to accept it. He was always telling her it wasn't her fault and that it only meant those babies weren't meant to be. He was sweet and caring, but she knew he was wrong, no matter what he would tell her or how often he said it.

They had become closer, far more empathetic towards one another and bonded far more than they had ever dared dream possible when they tried to envision their love for one another while dating, but they had, eventually, stopped making love again. Dan would always hold her, and always tell her how much he loved her. He never once tried to push her. But she couldn't stand the idea of those failures anymore. The only way to ensure it didn't happen was to stop what would cause them.

Emma took a deep breath, letting her tears fall as she placed a hand gently onto her tummy, looking into the sky.

Dan had never, not even once, thought to seek the comforts of another woman. She had been miserable and feeling lower than she ever had, but she had even given her blessing. She had even told him that she had been speaking with Rebecca. She was willing to move back to be closer and they could resume their relationship where it had ended when Hermione had been born. While the blonde-haired woman had been around until Hermione was seven, she had stopped having any form of romantic relationship with them out of respect for their marriage, even if the two married Grangers had been willing to keep it as it was.

Dan had vehemently refused the offer. As much as he loved Rebecca, she had been a part of the deal with Emma originally. He was in love with Emma, his wife, and that was how it was going to stay, thank you very much!

Emma had almost been able to overcome her insecurities and fears that day. But not quite.

Instead, she opened their limits to anything but actual intercourse. It was never the same, never meaning quite the same thing to two people who were in love, but it was enough, she hoped. He assured



her they could be celibate and he would be happy as long as he was with her, but she had always worried.

On her ninth birthday, Hermione wished for a baby brother or sister out loud, something she had always done silently before. She had learned and decided that there was no point keeping her wish to herself when she was five, but felt it was simply tradition. Until she learned about sex and realized her parents were the ones who needed to know, anyway. And it was their own fault for teaching her to read and not locking away various books.

Surprisingly, it worked. Dan once again grinned like a loon, only it was for a full month this time. Even when his car had been stolen a week in, he simply grinned and said stuff happens and he was insured.

From that point on, they were together fully at least twice a month and occasionally once every week, with all the desires and curious exploring that had made her feel like a lovestruck teenager again, although still quite hesitant, much like her younger self with Emily.

Now ... Now, with magic at her grasp, even if it isn't her own, Emma had found that nothing was wrong with her. When they learned of magical doctors, Emma had been curious and desperate, long-ignored fears and questions rising and she had gone to them, paying their obscene fee to find that she had a weak uterus and he gave her a potion to fix it.

One potion. One night of sleep. Problem solved. Throw in one potential boyfriend for her daughter, and the elder Grangers' romance problem was all but gone. The romance Emma saw between the two young teens lit a fire within her that she went to her husband to quench. No less than three times a night, at that.

Grinning in contented happiness, Emma looked to the paper she had brought with her, clicking her pen and began to write.

My dear, sweet, wonderful daughter Hermione,

It took me a while, but I made your birthday wish come true. I'm pregnant...

xXxXxXx

Three days after the Daily Prophet's article on Harry's new status came out, leaving the boy somewhat twitchy with the way all the students looked at him, Harry was beginning to think he'd had enough. Hermione had been finally released from the hospital wing without needing to spend the night any longer right before dinner and was finally allowed to use magic on her own and attend classes, which the bushy-haired one was pleased to hear.

He had gone to the library, being followed by too many people to go to the Room of Requirement, and was sitting in a corner towards the back where he had conjured a small couch and warded the aisle in the book shelves for privacy, which Luna and Hermione had taken advantage of in order to cuddle against him for warmth as they read, not willing to leave him alone.

However, when Hermione got up to get a new book, Harry pulled away a small bit from Luna, making the gray-eyed girl look at him inquisitively. "Er, Luna. I was wondering if I could ask you to stay the night with Hermione tonight."

Luna's brows knit together quickly and then parted slightly, looking immediately hurt. She had been with him each night for almost three weeks and had thought Harry was okay with that.

"It isn't that I don't enjoy your company, Luna," Harry hurried to say, not wanting her to feel bad. "But, this will be her first night back in her own dorm and I want to be sure she'll be okay."

Harry was also worried about both how comfortable he was growing with Luna sleeping with him and because he was no closer to coming to an idea on how to fix things and it was beginning to annoy him that he couldn't help his friends. But, he also needed to get back home and copy those books he had stolen if he wanted to keep them. But, he was too nervous to simply tell her that, since he didn't think it would be a good idea to let anyone know. At least not for now.

Luna blinked, her worried expression leaving. Harry had been growing increasingly nervous and frustrated in the past few days since their talk on relationships, particularly at nighttime and mornings, and she remembered her talk with her father. She felt

positive she understood what he was trying to do. "You don't need to worry, Harry. I understand what you want to do and it's okay."

Harry's eyes went wide. Luna always seemed to know things that didn't seem likely or possible, but this was ridiculous! "Er, you do?"

"Of course," Luna said with a soft smile. "You don't have to hide these things from me. I have been curious about how you managed the past three weeks I've been with you. I mean, I have been with you almost from the moment you wake up to when you fall asleep."

"Oh," Harry said, sounding surprised. He was beginning to wonder if she may be part Seer. It would explain an awful lot. "Well, I've only really felt the need to take care of it since Sunday."

"Oh, when we had our talk about relationships?" Luna asked, filing that away. It seemed some things required triggers. She would have to remember that. Daddy had never told her about that, though he did mention something about some things happening quickly. He mumbled a lot at the time, and didn't really speak to her directly, but at everything else. So it was hard to hear at the time.

Harry blushed and looked down. Both girls took whatever opportunities they could to bring that conversation up again. "Er, yes. Thanks for being so understanding."

"It's okay, Harry. It's perfectly natural."

Harry blinked. "Well, I suppose so. I just know that if I don't do it in time, then I will lose it."

Luna giggled softly before cuddling into his side and squeezing him tight. "But, in the future, if you want to rub one out, you don't need to send me away. Just let me know and I'll give you a little time alone."

Harry suddenly went bright red and his mind blanked, unsure how to respond. "Urk!"

"I thought having a girl next to you might make it easier," Luna pondered aloud, pinching her chin delicately between thumb and forefinger. It would seem her fears of Harry possibly being interested in her weren't as likely as she thought if he wouldn't do that with her there. Though, it could also be because he was so sheltered, she

considered. Still, maybe that meant she didn't have to worry about holding back on the cuddles and hugs as much as she had feared. That was certainly a relief. She didn't like not being able to hug him when she felt the desire to. "But, I suppose it could be difficult if you aren't in a relation ship with the girl and I have heard boys are supposed to be messy. Not to mention the awkwardness teenagers are said to have about their bodies, not that I ever really understood that."

"Understood what?" Hermione asked, coming back to the couch after losing her tail of a few students, who were hoping to follow her to Harry.

Luna flipped her hand dismissively. "Oh, Harry asked that I stay with you tonight because he wants to rub one out." Hermione went as red as Harry, who was now darting his eyes back and forth between the girls, his mouth working and only gurgling and choking sounds coming out. Grinning evilly, but only on the inside of course, Luna couldn't help but draw attention to what that thought did to Hermione. "Hermione, are you okay? You suddenly look so very cold."

Matchmaker Luna was on the case!

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Three hours later, Hermione was on her back with Luna sleeping soundly next to her. The brunette was unable to fall asleep, thoughts of what could be happening in the castle at that very moment, in one specific bed, keeping her mind far too active to do much else other than breath. A lot.

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The next day was Thursday, which Harry was glad to say left him with only two classes: Runes and Arithmancy. Granted, both were double classes, but he was still looking forward to them. They were not only new, which he couldn't say for any other class, though he did admit that giving Ron predictions to later come true regarding Divination was becoming a very amusing pastime, but they were also very fun for him, which he had never expected. Even after two and a half months, it didn't get old.

He only wished he hadn't been forced up most of the night, merging his stolen trove of literature with his grimoire. He had been scared that all of those copied books, since he had done so many at once, wouldn't last as long as normal. Thankfully, they had still been in his room where he had left them to get changed back into his school robes. Stashing the pilfered time-turners had been quick as well, which he was happy about.

Actually, he kind of wished Hermione didn't blush so heavily and refused to look him in the eye. Odd as it seemed, she was even physically closer to him that morning than usual, despite not looking at his face. It wouldn't have been so bad if he had actually done what was making them both so nervous to begin with. But, denying it now would seem a poor attempt to lie even to him, and he knew he was telling the truth.

"I honestly don't know what you're so embarrassed about," Luna said, frustrated that it looked as though her plan was backfiring on her. She needed those two to get together or she would feel like she had somehow stopped it from happening! "Haven't you been practicing occlumency and legilimency against one another? You already know, or should know, you have naughty fantasies about each other. How is this really any different? And you've both seen me naked. I didn't get all awkward about it. And you two haven't even seen anything to be embarrassed about."

Harry wanted to say it was because nothing actually happened, but knew better. They'd never believe him and, to be honest, he didn't want to make them think he was lying about something that was really so trivial.

He still kept his mouth shut, of course.

"You're right," Hermione sighed. "It isn't like it isn't natural. Everyone does it."

Harry's eyes went buggy for a moment as he realized what she was admitting to. He even began to stare off into space for a few seconds until Hermione's hand whacked him upside the back of his head.

"Harry, behave!"

Playful banter while his mind was currently so in the gutter he was practically on the other side of the world, Harry couldn't resist. "You can't expect me to not think about it after what you just said," he admitted.

"I think about the two of you all the time," Luna offered, hoping Hermione would accept her attraction to Harry and be done with it. It wasn't like she didn't think about the two of them dating. She did almost every day and during each of her classes. She had plans to bring to fruition, after all!

But the two third-years looked at her in pink-cheeked shock since dating was different than they were thinking from her suggestive comment.

Harry and Hermione hadn't said much else until towards the end of Ancient Runes where the class was getting some surprising news from Professor Babbling. "Alright class! Now, we've studied and memorized your runes extensively and discussed how to apply them. Who would like to provide a basic synopsis?"

Several hands went into the air, Hermione's most insistent amongst them in hopes of making up for her missed time. "Mister Potter? Would you like the honors?" Harry looked betrayed as he was called upon again after having asked for volunteers. The woman did that more often than not when asking for clarification or something obscure and he had no idea why. Especially when there were people perfectly willing to answer who had raised their hands! "What is different with runes than spells, why use them and give an example to define each."

"Runes are permanent," Harry began, sighing. "They are required to enchant items since spells will wear off or weaken with ambient magics. They are meant to last. Likewise, they are capable of doing the same spells we can do from wands and, while they take longer to etch, they can perform the most complex magics far more easily than with wands and will usually end up requiring far less magic than purely with a wand because the runes contain the power rather than performing everything with pure magic like a wand would demand, which also means they can usually be more efficient."

"Example," Bathsheba demanded simply.

"Enchantments," Harry said simply. "There are two basic methods to enchant an item and imbue it with magic. The first are cheaper and usually obtained in simpler children's toys. You have your item, put minor runes to contain magic and then cast the spell so that the runes act like a container wherein the magic is then replicated on demand, such as a torch. Five runes and the lumos spell, you've got one that is usable by a child, but easy to break."

Professor Babbling raised a thin eyebrow. Those didn't exist, but would be exceptionally easy to make, cheap and children would love them. "Continue."

"The other method would be to use the runes to create the spell effect, requiring two runes for the lumos spell, but then requiring the runes to activate and deactivate the spell, along with the runes to control the power, color of the light and one to control where the power for the spell comes from so it doesn't bleed the same child dry using magic from its core. The second method requires more runes, even for such a simple spell, but will last much longer, even forever if runes to make the device impermeable were used, and would be of far greater quality."

Harry leaned back, deciding to go just a touch further. "If you took the same applications and made protection items, the first version's enchantments would shatter if hit with a single spell, either only making it one-time use, or not blocking enough to be of any good. The second version would not break and only require either recharging, or absorption properties to absorb the spells sent at the wearer to both get stronger or to deflect some of what it needs to protect the wearer from."

Bathsheba smiled brightly as she beamed at Harry before speaking to the rest of the class. "Most of what you find in Diagon Alley is going to be enchanted using the first method Mister Potter described. It's easier, by far, and requires very little in the way of understanding. You simply put the proper runes, which will almost always be the same regardless of what the effect will be, and then charge it, then you are done. The second method requires planning what runes to use that don't interfere with one another, where to place them, what order, how to connect them and then simply activating them, hoping it won't blow up in your face."

Once again, Professor Babbling gestured to the items she had uncovered their first day of class. "Each item you see there does only one primary thing. The waste basket will 'eat' the trash that is placed within it, though it is a simple vanishing charm. The faucet is nothing more than a water-conjuration rune with a variable for both knobs that determine how much power is placed into a fire or ice rune. But they all have one other thing in common. What is it?"

Moments ticked by before Hermione raised her hand, noticing what had caught her attention. "They're all fairly large, aren't they? Even your glowing sphere is a large ball."

"Yes," Babbling said with a nod. "Runes are a beautiful art that can accomplish a great many things. However, their biggest fault, other than difficulty, is size. You must have the room to do whatever it is you are attempting. That is one of the reasons enchanted items are so horribly expensive."

"What about rings, necklaces and things like that?" Harry asked, wondering about his Christmas gifts that were meant to block everything up to a certain level of power. They couldn't stop the unforgivables, but they should stop almost anything requiring the amount of power it took to cast fiendfyre. That was about a mid-level dark spell. But, those charms were rather small.

"Hellishly expensive," Bathsheba confirmed with a nod.

"No, I mean how can you put a lot into them to do like protection charms and such?" Harry asked, frowning. He knew very well how expensive they were, thank you very much!

"Ah. Depends on who makes them."

"Goblins," Harry said without preamble, getting more than just a few raised eyebrows and curious looks.

"Well, their secrets are more well-protected than almost anyone," Professor Babbling said. "They also rarely enchant anything for anyone. But, it's theorized that they somehow make the runes separate from what they are enchanting and then fold it into the metal during some sort of forging process. We have never been able to tell. They never have the runes on the outside of the item that anyone has ever been able to see and they will never enchant



anything but metal. And trying to reverse the forging process destroys not only the magic in it, but usually the item and whoever is trying at the same time."

"Now," Bathsheba said with a clap of her hands. "The reason I am bringing this up is because the end of the first term will be coming in a few weeks. Your end-of-year assignment is going to be making something that requires the use of runes. You may work with a partner if you wish, but if you do, it must be complex enough that you both must work on separate functions, meaning it must do multiple things."

Sitting on the desk, Professor Babbling crossed her ankles and began to swing them as she continued. "I am telling you about this now, because you will have a thesis, or an essay that explains what you expect to happen with what you build, by the time you return from your Christmas break. This will give you ample time to come up with a project and then decide on what you will do."

"You will not have to make something new," she continued. "You may find something that is already designed, which I honestly recommend for first-years unless you think up something like the torch Mister Potter mentioned and feel you can make it which I would award bonus points for, or you may make up something that is totally new or recreate something possibly obscure, though I expect research notes to prove you didn't just look up something. I will not allow anyone to use the torch idea, though. We have similar ideas using the glow spheres and Mister Potter came up with it first."

"Parchment and quills out, please. I'll give you your requirements." She waited until everyone was ready. "I will wish to know the following: what is your item made of and how does it affect your results, what functions does it have, what runes will you use and why those; you will also give me an alternative to your original design or explain why there is no such alternative and lastly, you will explain your item's purpose. Not what it does, but why we would want it with multiple examples."

Hermione immediately raised her hand, getting permission to speak. "Professor, if we take something that already exists and find some way to improve upon it, would that be acceptable? For example, Harry mentioned changing the color of the lumos for his torch example. If I would also like to see about making it send out pictures

as well, could that be acceptable also? Like if I wanted it to project an underwater scene for a baby's room or those who like aquariums?"

"I would want something better than a static picture, but yes. Making a change like that on a current item would be acceptable." The teacher looked around the class, seeing if anyone else had questions. Finding none, she smiled. "Alright! Now then. If you cannot find something to do, come to me by the end of next week and I will assign you a project. Otherwise, you may take this class to come up with ideas and find a partner who would like to work on a similar idea as well."

Hermione immediately turned to Harry, thinking he would be about to ask, but instead found him pondering quietly. Blinking owlshly, she poked him in the side. "What are you thinking about?"

Harry looked to Hermione before humming to himself in thought. "I've been thinking about something for a while now, but your glow sphere question gave me another thought and I'm trying to decide which I want to do."

Hermione's eyebrows rose and a smirk showed on her face. "What're your ideas? Maybe I can help or, if you choose one, I may take the other. I was planning on thinking up something new for the extra credit."

Harry smiled as he hugged Hermione around her shoulders with one arm. "That's why you're you, Hermione," he said, getting a pink blush from the girl. "I've been having lots of ideas when I decided to take this class, though I doubt most are realistic. But, I was thinking about making a ball you can store a memory in and it would play like when you go inside of a pensieve and it's like you're really inside of the memory, but nothing actually touches you. So, it'd be like a projection to fill up the room."

"That's impressive, but possibly a little difficult for us," Hermione said, thinking of how interesting that could be. It would be a nice way to share the magical world with her parents. "I saw a pensieve in Diagon Alley and really wanted to get it, but it was extremely expensive and it was covered completely in runes."

Harry nodded, thinking about the one in Dumbledore's office. "True. My other idea was to bring magic to muggles and squibs." After all, if he could create special wands that provided shields, her family would be much safer, as would virtually anyone's. And, knowing most adults couldn't cast a Patronus, then those would be crazy popular.

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed, trying to figure that out. "How? They can't use magic. Filch is always complaining about things like that when he's not talking about torturing a student."

Harry grinned. "It's actually pretty easy from what I can tell. It's just not very efficient. I guess you could call it a magical prosthesis. Just don't make any 'prosthetic wand' comments."

"Harry!" Hermione chided with a yelp of surprise and a blush as she caught on and smacked his arm, even though she had a huge grin and barely refrained from laughing loudly. When had Harry begun to make such crude jokes? When did she honestly start finding them funny?

Harry snickered before shaking his head. "Actually, this is a precursor to something I was thinking about making for your parents."

"My ... parents?" Hermione asked quietly, being thrown totally off guard.

"Well, think about it. The wizarding world doesn't really seem to have much in the way of dentists. I mean, have you seen some of the mouths of the magicals in Diagon Alley?"

"Yea," Hermione said with a flinch. "My parents did, first, though. Apparently, all they have in the way of dental hygiene is a potion that acts like mouthwash and one that whitens teeth other than a breath freshening charm. Other than that, they've got a spell that turns your food to mash so you can gum it. That's why they send me here every year with a dozen extra toothbrushes and extra tubes of paste."

Harry simply smiled. "Well, I was thinking of using this same concept for a secret project and magical dental tools," he explained. "If they

chose to take up a magical dental clinic, your parents would completely corner the market."

Hermione's eyes had gone glassy as she thought about her parents joining her in this world of magic and she barely noticed as she cuddled into Harry's side as her daydream went off from there.

"Hermione?" Harry asked. "Hermione, you're cutting off circulation ... Er, Hermione, my hand is going numb..."

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Harry's hand was still tingling as he entered the Great Hall with Hermione, who was much more chipper than she had been since getting out of the hospital wing that morning. She was apparently very happy with Harry's idea and only upset that he was hoping to figure it out on his own.

Honestly, he was hoping to learn this particular subject well enough that he didn't have to ask Hermione for her help. It was the one thing he could try to use and determine if he was really progressing of his own merits, or if he was simply ahead of the rest simply because he had already lived through those particular classes.

Just as the two entered the Great Hall, however, Harry's good mood was completely destroyed by an aristocratic drawl that Harry had come to truly despise. "Oh look," Draco Malfoy spoke to those around him, "the mudblood survived after all! What a pity! I swear, her kind are like cockroaches. You just can't get rid of them!"

The half dozen students around Draco that were laughing suddenly stopped as Harry rushed to Draco and grabbed him by the neck with one hand, subtly using wandless magic to lighten the boy so he could lift him up. "And Death Eaters and their spawn are like the plague," Harry growled, squeezing Draco's throat enough to make the blond boy begin to choke. "You know, Malfoy, not even a hundred years ago, people like you would be taken to the public square and burned at the stake just because you make a mockery of everything about magical culture."

"Harry, stop!" Hermione demanded, unable to believe the Harry she knew was suddenly being so violent. "You'll get in trouble!"

"When my f-father hears a-about this," Draco seethed through gnashed teeth, struggling for every breath he took.

"That's why I will never respect you, Malfoy!" Harry roared, shoving his arm forward and pressing his victim into the wall, causing Draco to squeak as air escaped his constricted throat and his face began to redden. His eyes were beginning to water and turn pink as the blood found it had nowhere to go. The various people around them were suddenly quite confused, most especially the Slytherins.

"Potter! Unhand him right now!" Snape yelled, brandishing his wand, only to be knocked back as a shimmering shield popped into existence around the duo. Only Minerva recognized it as the castle's magic and not Harry's as she sent a message for Dumbledore to get there right away.

Without seeing any of this, Harry continued after lessening his grip enough to make sure Draco was looking at him as the Malfoy scion grabbed weakly at Harry's hands, silently pleading for release. "You're pathetic, Malfoy! Any time something happens in your minimal existence, you rush to Daddy and whine like a weak little child who had his toy taken. Where is your father now!" Harry roared.

Draco looked around, hoping someone, anyone, would come to his defense, but no one did. Most were totally unsure of what they could do, much less how to go about it. All Draco could hear was his heart beating, louder and slower, under Potter's angry assault. Still, Harry continued.

"I am here right now, Malfoy," Harry continued to growl. "I am here, deciding I have had enough of your shite that I'm going to do something about it! Where is your father? Where is his political power now? What are you going to do now that you can't just run to Daddy?"

Harry's lip curled before he let the Malfoy heir drop to the ground in a heap, coughing to clear his abused airways and gulping in air as a headache began to form. "Ever since our first train ride to Hogwarts," Harry began as Draco glared up at him, "you have been a prick who can't keep his prejudice out of every day conversation or your mouth shut around people who constantly outclass you in every way. This is the end, Malfoy."

Several spines felt a shiver run their lengths as Harry's voice leveled out and became a low tone that promised pain.

"You've worked hard, almost daily for the past two and a half years, to turn me into an enemy, even when me and my friends ignore you like the pest you are. Continue as you have been, and I promise, I'll become the enemy you are making me."

Dumbledore, having arrived just in time to hear Harry's ultimatum couldn't help the feeling of fear and dread that ran down his spine and made all of his beard hairs straighten. "What is going on here?" Albus demanded, speaking loudly into the throng and seeming even louder from the silence that had enveloped everyone.

"Malfoy called Hermione a mudblood who was like a cockroach because you can't get rid of them. I decided to make my displeasure known and warn him off speaking like that again, sir," Harry said, still glaring at Malfoy who had turned away almost immediately, feeling not only embarrassed that this had happened in the Great Hall in front of most of the school, but like he actually was the weakling Potter just claimed him to be. It also didn't help that it was a hard reality to face that any time he had a problem, he went to his father or, if it was a relatively minor thing in school, Severus since the man was his godfather.

"Mister Potter, you cannot go about threatening students whenever they say things you do not like," Dumbledore warned. "That will be fifty points from Gryffindor and a week's detentions."

Harry snorted, finally looking away from Draco to the old man who looked at him with what appeared disappointment. "Do you so the counters changing?" He asked rhetorically, since everyone could tell they hadn't budged. "You have allowed Draco and his ilk to spout off all the garbage they want in the Great Hall and the school as a whole and allow them to get away with hexing students, most especially in the dungeons and they tend to get away without a slap on the wrist. Or, in Snape's classes, a Slytherin may botch up one of our cauldrons, and they'll get points while we lose them. Screw that," Harry stated bitterly.

Harry knew he shouldn't be doing or saying these things, but his body was aching from the exercises, he was scared to death over what would happen to Luna and how to handle that situation as a

whole, the memories he had of what happened to Hermione that he seemed to recover were playing in his dreams and all the stuff about him and his status in the papers had him frustrated, angry and just as bitter as he sounded. He also couldn't quite place a finger on it, but there was something about Draco that was making him madder at the blond ponce whenever he spouted off that pureblood crap that made him feel like he did before remembering Hermione's torture, and that scared him because he didn't think he could handle another such memory.

"Mister Potter, we do the best we can-," McGonagall began, only to cut off when Harry snorted again.

"You were in here, McGonagall," he bit out, looking angrily at the graying Scotswoman. "You are almost always here when this happens and you don't do a damn thing. The only time I hear you defending us from this crap is in your classroom. Don't think we're idiots just because we're young. We can tell when you don't stand up for us, Professor."

Luna walked in from her Herbology class, having been required to bathe to get the mud that had found its way onto her and her clothes to find the Great Hall silent and everyone looking at Harry. "Well ... This certainly looks awkward," she said into the quiet.

"Just had to make a point, Luna," Harry said as he motioned both her and Hermione to the Gryffindor table as everyone sat in their seats and began talking about what had just happened and how the teachers weren't doing anything else about it, it seemed.

"I think it was bloody brilliant!" Ron said from the table where he had seen all the action. "That slimy git looked like he was about to piss himself! Way to go, Harry!"

"A point?" Hermione asked angrily. "Harry, you just physically assaulted Malfoy and threatened him!"

"Which was the point I had to make," Harry said simply. "Do you not remember that Draco has been a little prick since day one? Or that he tried to get Buckbeak killed because Draco was the one being an idiot? Or that his father is the one who gave Ginny the diary last year that set the basilisk loose on the school?"

Hermione winced with the last few points, but still couldn't let it slide. "Harry, we can't hold Draco responsible for his father's actions. And yes, Draco's been a little weasel, but it hardly constitutes fighting."

"He reminds me more of a ferret for some reason," Luna said with a shrug, grabbing for her dinner.

"Hermione, what did he say that upset me?" Harry asked, wondering if Hermione was serious.

"He called me a mudblood," she said. "He's done it before and it's a hurtful comment, but it isn't much different than any other name."

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "He also said you should have died and it was a shame you didn't. It may not have been those words, but it was certainly the meaning."

"Harry, you just can't go about getting into fights with anyone you dislike-

"Dislike?" Harry asked. "Hermione, I know you don't like what I did and, to be honest I wasn't too fond of it, either, but it had to be done. He needs to realize there are consequences for your actions and, if the staff can't do it, then I will."

"Why you, Harry?" Hermione asked simply. "Why do you have to be the one to do it?"

"Because no one else will," he said after a moment. He sighed, gesturing with his chin to the room at large. "Look around, Hermione. Most of the school was here at the time and several dozen heard what was going on. They don't do anything because they're scared of punishments and retaliation and because it's been going on for decades if not centuries."

Harry shook his head, gesturing to the staff table. "The teachers let it happen. McGonagall is almost always here when the lunch hour starts and is never saying or doing anything to put a stop to it. I admit she's said that there is nothing legally wrong about it, but it is still morally wrong to say such prejudiced things and they can still stop it when they're around. She never defends us against the bullshit excuses Snape comes up with to take points and give detentions."



"Too right, mate," Ron said as he chewed. "Remember that greasy git taking points from Hermione for 'being an annoying know-it-all'? Or whenever she answers questions correctly and he gets angry and says she answered too much? Or when I breathed too loud, blinked too much, tried to eat the ingredients or the like?"

"I remember every time," Harry said with a nod of his head. He looked back to Hermione who looked less sure of herself and as though beginning to contemplate his view.

"Hermione, let me ask you something. Think of what's going on here like ... I don't know, women's voting rights. Do you remember when women got the right to vote?" He asked, figuring she'd remember from primary school. He knew it was recently, but not exactly when.

"Nineteen eighteen," she answered promptly, looking at him curiously. "At least for women in the U.K., why? What does that have to do with this? They aren't the same thing."

"No, but they're similar in nature," Harry explained. "How behind the times is the wizarding world compared to the muggle?"

"Probably a good two hundred years," she said with a frown. "Less in many areas, but the social norms and mores seem to be about that period."

Ron looked at his two friends with confusion and a bit of disgust. The conversation was boring and about a bunch of stupid topics. And he didn't take too well to being told his society was somehow inferior to the muggles who couldn't even use magic.

"Right," Harry nodded. "Now, women at the time were a somewhat subjugated party, right? Seen as somewhat inferior and needing to be protected and without many rights?"

"Yes," Hermione growled out. She could tell where he was going with this.

"I'm not saying it was right, Hermione," Harry said calmly. "You've more than proven women can be better than men in a good many areas by yourself than just examples from the past. But what I'm saying is, any changes that have had to come in the past, no matter

which world you look at, had to come from people standing up and saying 'no more'. They had to fight for what they believed in and for their rights. This isn't any different. The way the school is run now is the same as it was fifty years ago when Voldemort was rising to power, including the bigotry to a person's parentage."

"I understand that, Harry," Hermione said with a sigh as she slumped and moved her food around with her fork. "I just don't like the idea of you in trouble or getting into fights. I don't think violence is the answer."

Harry smiled warmly. "I don't either, to be honest," he admitted. "But if we're honest, I'm probably one of the only ones who can right now. And if it doesn't start in school, then where will it start? These are developmental years," he said, paraphrasing something she told him in their fifth year to get him to lead the Defense Association. Hopefully, she actually believed that and this would help her think similarly. "This is when we have to make the changes, or it won't happen."

"If it means you kick Malfoy around some more, I'm all for it, mate," Ron said happily, causing Hermione to glare at him.

Harry, seeing that, shook his head. "It isn't about that, Ron," he said, hoping Hermione was paying attention. "It's necessary."

For some reason, Hermione wanted to ask why. Why was it necessary to do these things and what was with his sudden drive to learn, study and the very different personality since the summer. But, she knew that, even if she did, he probably would never answer her there. So she waited, biding her time until she felt she could get answers out of him.

Her plotting was interrupted as an owl flew down and held out its leg to her.

"Who'd send you something?" Ron asked, coming across a little more belligerently than he meant for it to. He didn't know anyone in the magical world that would send Hermione anything.

"My parents, Ron," Hermione grumbled. "They do, on occasion, like to talk to their only daughter, whom they only see for about two months a year. I showed them how they can send me mail from the

post office in Diagon Alley if they want to send me letters without responding to what I send to them." She took the letter and began reading, hoping to ignore Ron and his eating habits for a little while.

She almost immediately squeaked in shock.

"Is everything okay?" Harry asked, wondering at her wide eyes and gaping mouth.

"My ... my mother's pregnant," Hermione said quietly, continuing to read the short message and then putting it down.

Luna clapped happily and grinned widely. "Congratulations! Do you know if you'll have a brother or sister yet?"

"No, not yet," Hermione said, still shocked. "It's too early to tell yet."

"I wonder how that happened," Harry wondered to himself out loud. He wasn't sure what had happened to make something that huge change, especially in relation to the Grangers. He certainly hadn't been the cause of it!

Hermione blushed, looking at Harry wide-eyed even as Ron laughed at him. "Harry, mate! Really? Even I know that!" Ron chuckled, slapping Harry on the back.

Harry scowled. "Not that, Ron! I understand that part."

"Oh yea?" Ron asked, thinking Harry was covering for his lack of knowledge. "Then what sized cauldron do you grow 'em in, huh? And when do you plan them in the cabbage patch?"

Hermione, Luna and Harry, even Neville, looked at Ron like he was crazy.

"What?" The redhead asked, suddenly feeling defensive. "Dad told me all about it! You make the potion in the bed, then plant it like a head of cabbage and it'll grow in nine months. How do you think the Weasleys have so many? We have all sorts of room for planting cabbages."

Luna, Hermione and Neville looked to Harry, who immediately put his hands up and shook his head. "Forget it! I'm not telling him a bloody thing!"

"Not to worry, Harry," one of the twins said, sidling up to Ron's left.

"We'll handle this. It's only right," the other said from Ron's right, finally making the youngest male pale as he was dragged off, complaining about still eating. Neither twin really cared, though. They had a story to tell, and then testing to perform.

Harry watched the youngest male Weasleys leave as Ron tried to escape the twins' clutches, a plan forming in his head. "Heh," Harry laughed once. "Heh heh... Ha! MWA HA HA!"

Hours of practice in front of the mirror finally came into play as he finally managed the perfect evil villain laugh, making a few of the students near him look on in worry as the Great Hall quieted as Harry Potter seemed to snap.

"Harry?" Hermione asked carefully, unsure of Harry's deep belly laughter. It sounded like something from an old Superman cartoon from the cliché and corny villain.

Harry stopped laughing, but maintained a wider-than-sane grin as he looked down to Hermione. "Don't worry. I just got an idea," he told her, stuffing his mouth quickly and then rushing from the Great Hall and to the owlry, after a quick stop to 'borrow' a mail-order catalog from Alicia Spinnet.

"Sorry Hedwig," Harry soothed his familiar as he called a school owl to him. "This is just an order for a prank. I wanted to save you because Hermione's going to be sending an important letter to her parents. Apparently, they're having a baby! Is that okay?"

Hedwig, properly appeased, hooted softly, glancing down at Harry's order only to squawk in shock and then looked up at Harry questioningly.

"Well, it's a prank, you see," Harry said with a grin, causing Hedwig to snuffle in laughter.

Name: Draco Malfoy

Age: Old Enough

Delivery Method: Theme (Submissive, 10G)

Delivery Location: Hogwarts, Great Hall, 7:30PM - Dinner

Catalog: 6252

Items:

Fuzzy Pink restraints: x4

Cat o' Nine-Tails: x1

Anal Plugs:

Extra Large: x2

Large: x1

Small: x8

Face Mask 8 w/zipper mouth: x1

Assless Chaps (leather): x2

Choker (w/owner tag: "SNAPE"): x1

Enchanted Teaching Tools (Sub; Bond on contact): x2

"Hoot?" Hedwig asked.

"No, I don't really think it's too much," Harry responded easily, rolling the order form up and tying it to the owl's leg. "He was in the middle of the Great Hall and said Hermione should have died. I think this is a small thing, don't you?" He asked, adding the gold to the order via the pouch included with the form.

Hedwig hissed her agreement, making the other owls shift uncomfortably.

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"Baby steps, baby steps," she chanted rhythmically to herself, doing her best to move forward on her legs and maintain her balance at the same time.

In the past hour, she'd moved about nine feet.

Hogwarts had been working diligently on her father's idea, hoping to make him proud by being able to move about like a big girl. It was strange, she noticed, to want him to feel a certain emotion for her, specifically, but she liked the feeling. It had been a long time since she had really felt anything but what the students themselves felt. It was nothing like having those emotions playing about inside of her as her own. What she felt from the students and staff was like a poor imitation, an echo, of what she felt right then.

It had actually required a substantial portion of her ability to focus to control her body. She never actually realized just how much work it took to be human. Granted, she wasn't human, not really, but she could create a human body simulacrum and put her awareness into it. That part had, surprisingly enough, been easy. She wouldn't be able to use much magic, though, or the body would lose its ability to form and would fade away, sending her consciousness reeling back into Hogwarts, though. However, in Hogwarts, her real body, she would be perfectly fine.

"Eep!" Hogwarts' new body went tumbling, falling onto the many pillows and rolling, making her giggle. She hadn't been fond of falling until she thought of using pillows around her. Before that, falling hurt. Now, though, the sensation was very interesting. She had never felt that sensation of movement, before. It was exhilarating! And she couldn't get over wriggling her fingers and toes! They were so ... wriggly!

She giggled, thinking it would be fun to go falling with her father and whichever girl was probably her mother. And if she couldn't figure it out, then she'd just ask if both would adopt her, thus taking the problem away. She wasn't really biological, so there was no way she could think of to test her heritage. And she took magic from so many sources and even the earth itself that she knew her magic would feel different from anyone else's. It would even be a little different tomorrow than it was that day. It always fluctuated.

Grinning like Luna was prone to, the girl decided she would work a little on crawling again. It was surprisingly tiring to keep falling and getting back up. She had no idea how the humans could do it so often.

She withdrew much more of her attention from the school itself, leaving only enough to keep her defenses active and monitored, along with monitoring her father in case she needed to shield him again. It meant she couldn't enjoy the random conversations anymore, since she couldn't hear in the halls anymore, or the classrooms, which had been amongst the first places she withdrew her attentions since there was staff there, but hopefully, she would learn to walk, and soon even run!

Hogwarts immediately gulped in breaths and coughed. "Ah! I forgot to breath again!"

Taking the time to remember to breath and keep her balance this time, Hogwarts began anew. For only six days of practice, she felt she was doing pretty well.

"Honestly, how could there not be books about this in the library! This is far more difficult than some of those spells!" Grinning, she began moving forward carefully, continuing to talk to herself after realizing early on that it helped her remember to breathe, meaning she did a lot of it, usually faster the more excited she became. "After I learn to walk, I'll decide on how I want my body to look! Father will be so pleased with me!"

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"Me? What about you?" Harry asked sitting in a chair by the fireplace in the common room while Hermione lounged on the couch early the next morning. "She went to bed in your dorm last night. Why didn't you notice her getting up?"

"I've not been sleeping well," Hermione huffed. "I've been tired. You, however, have always been a very light sleeper. Why didn't you notice her crawling into bed? She was naked again." Hermione wondered if maybe he had noticed, and just didn't care, or if maybe he enjoyed it. She knew Luna probably got dressed first, again. That was what she usually did, but for some reason, she didn't always.

"She's sneaky," Harry said with a shrug, looking curiously smug.

"Harry, I've seen you wake up just from people moving around you," Hermione said, rolling her eyes. "No one is that sneaky when it comes to you."

"Exhibit 'A'," Harry said, pointing to Hermione's lap. "Look down."

Hermione did so, confusedly, only to barely withhold a shriek as she found Luna snuggled up and sleeping in her lap. "Wha-How? We left her in your bed!"

"She's like a sleepy little ninja," Harry said with an affectionate smirk.

Hermione looked up, letting her hands rest on Luna's shoulders and lightly stroking the girl's hair out of habit. "Okay. I retract my earlier accusations and apologize for thinking there was any way you would wake up from this."

Harry chuckled. "Well, look at the bright side. She dressed before going to sleep this time. But I'll want to find out why she didn't have clothes on to begin with again. I thought it was just Cho and her group that was doing that."

"Mm, just one of the students' dung bombs had gone off in our dorm," Luna said groggily, fisting her eyes while yawning. "Peeves took them in and I didn't have anything that was clean after a quick shower except my cloak."

"Sorry to wake you, Luna," Hermione apologized.

"It's not a problem. I didn't mean to fall asleep again. I've been having some bad dreams about what Cho did to you, so I just wanted to stay close." While Luna cuddled into the embrace Hermione provided, Harry pondered as he realized that he hadn't really been having many nightmares since coming back. He had been reliving what he thought were reclaimed memories, at least the one of Hermione where Bellatrix had a hold of her, but nothing overly serious beyond that. And during the summer, he couldn't really remember getting many. That had never really happened to him before unless he was sleeping with Hermione and sharing their body heat. He wondered why that was happening.



It was nearly an hour later when they were nearing the Great Hall for breakfast that they spoke again.

"Er, Harry?" Hermione asked after a few minutes of companionable silence.

"Hm?"

"I've been working on my mental defenses since you last tested them. I was wondering if you wanted to try them again."

Harry blushed, thinking about that last time and the things he had inadvertently learned and seen. "I don't mind if you don't, but are you sure you're okay with me possibly finding another memory like before?"

Hermione also blushed, but less so than Harry. She wouldn't tell him, but she had been thinking about purposefully sending him into a memory like that, just to see his response to it. There may have also been a little hope he'd return the favor again, though, too. "I trust you Harry, and it isn't like you haven't already seen things that are a little embarrassing."

Harry nodded after a moment. "Alright. What about you, Luna? You mentioned you know about these things. Do you want to test your shields also? Just to see how strong they are? I don't really know much about legilimency, but my book said it was good to be tested every now and then."

Luna considered that for a moment, wondering at what he may find in her mind, but decided it was highly unlikely he could break her defenses. Her father was exceptional at the mind arts, even if a trifle odd, and he couldn't get past them anymore. "It would probably be a good idea," she agreed after a second from his question. "If you don't mind, I'd also like both of you to try. A mind can build an immunity to a single probe if it is done often enough."

"You mean it's good to practice defending yourself from multiple people?" Hermione asked. "Or just one single probe regardless?"

"Not at once if at all possible, but yes," Luna agreed with a bob of her head. "Different minds think differently, so they will attack differently, using different methods. Learning to defend your mind

from multiple minds is good for finding holes in your defenses. So, if you don't mind, I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

Hermione blushed as Harry nodded, being unfamiliar with that particular phrase as he agreed immediately. "Er, what do you model your mindscape after, Luna?" The brunette asked.

The doe-eyed girl looked to Hermione quizzically. "Mindscape? I'm afraid I don't have one."

"Then how do you defend your mind?" Hermione asked.

"With my walnut," Luna explained simply, shrugging as though it were obvious.

Hermione spluttered a response for several seconds, unsure of what to say.

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That Saturday, the twentieth, found Harry actually stalking Argus Filch for the first time he could ever remember, rather than the creepy old man stalking a student. He had just recently finished breakfast and had a large amount to do that day, so chose to get this meeting out of the way as early as possible. "Mister Filch?"

The scraggly man spun on his heel and regarded Harry with a venomous gaze. "Wha' d'ya want?" Filch snapped, suspicious of the boy. "You here t'ah prank old' Filch! You won't succeed! I'm on t'ah you troublemakers!" His eyes darted about, looking for anything that could suggest the boy had an accomplice hiding somewhere. He may not be able to perform magic, but he could see it and he knew how to look for disillusioned people, but he didn't see any of the tell-tell distortions in the air.

"No pranks," Harry said, somehow feeling guilty that the first place Filch would go would be thinking Harry was there to do something to him. He had never realized it before, but the man really didn't have any sort of defense against literally every single person in the school. He was the only one incapable of using magic and he really even had cause to fear the first years using magic. He silently resolved not to cause the grouchy man any more grief than necessary. Harry never went out of his way to do anything, but he didn't exactly bother

to help the man out, either, when dealing with the mess left in his wake.

"Then what 're you here for?" Filch wheezed suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at Harry.

"I am taking two classes, Runes and Arithmancy. I'm going to be combining my projects for both classes into one substantial project. Basically, I'm going to make pre-loaded wands," Harry explained. "My hope is to make them so that even a muggle could use them. My problem, though, is that I'll need someone who isn't magical to demonstrate them. I was hoping you'd be willing to do so if I made some specifically for you; ones preloaded with cleaning, vanishing and lighting spells, including one for shields and probably a warming charm."

Filch as a bastard, but not an idiot. "You'll be wantin' me to test these then?" The idea of using magic, even if it was with a crutch like what Potter was on about, was too great to pass up for a man who had, since his birth, been ostracized, ridiculed and tormented for his lack of magical ability. Even if this was some horrific trick by the lad, even if it mean he'd get his heart crushed later, he couldn't really say no to the chance. To the possibility of it all.

"I'll be doing the testing myself," Harry said. "I'll not risk hurting someone if they fail or blow up or something. But once I do test them, I'll need to be sure someone can use them without casting through it or powering it through their own magic. That's where you'll come in. Then I'll double-check my findings by asking some muggles I know who are aware of magic. If you accept, I'll make preset wands for you to help in your job here that you can keep."

Filch was silent and stared at Harry for a good few minutes. He wanted to believe, he dreamed of the day, but never would he suspect that any of the hellions at Hogwarts could ever provide, nor would he have ever thought that they would. They hated him and he hated them. That level of hatred had been growing in the past sixty-some years and he believed it always would. But this ... he could be normal for once! Or as close to it as he could ever be. "Would you also be givin' me a set t'eh defend meself from the bastards who're always goin' about an' hexin' me?"

Harry pondered for a moment before reluctantly shaking his head. "You're constantly talking about torturing students and how you'd like to string us up and the like. I won't give you anything to help you with something like that, but I will make something for you that you can prove it happened that you can bring to me any time something happens. If a student really does hex you when you're defenseless, or even if you've got the shield wand and just can't fight back, I'll ensure they suffer for it. And if it's bad enough, I may let you decide their punishments, but you won't be able to torture anyone. Perhaps they'll have to be your magic and do all your cleaning for however long or something."

Filch growled, feeling it wasn't very fair at all. But, he could admit the boy was smarter than he had taken him for. Argus had been alone for a very long, long time, in wanting things to go back to the good old days. Suddenly gaining the power to do those things probably wasn't for the best anyway. Not unless he wanted the Potter brat after his hide. Besides, there were all sorts of ways he had envisioned using magic in roundabout ways through the years. Something along the lines of, 'if I only had that spell at my disposal' where he could think of all the different ways to use it. "No harm in a tripping jinx one, eh?"

"We'll see," Harry said diplomatically, though in the same tone of voice a parent would use to their child meaning 'not bloody likely'.

"Fine," Argus grumbled. "I'll help yeh out. But don't go expectin' me to go easy on yeh if'n I ever see you breaking the rules!"

"Fair enough," Harry said, turning and walking away with a grin.

Harry had been serious when he told Hermione he wanted to see if he could make magical variations to dental tools for her parents, but that, and this, were both stepping stones into what he was hoping to do. He wanted to find a way to create a wand that would basically break any ward that he came across. Not a single thing he had read thus far said it was possible, but none said that it wasn't possible, either. His hope was to set up wards of his own from simple silencing ones up to whatever he could do and see how things reacted.

Simple baby steps.

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Later that night, after Harry made a very public and long Defense Association meeting and going to the restroom on the sixth floor that he had prearranged to get a particular item, he was alone, standing in the center of the Chamber of Secrets, waiting for the little wind-up clock he had placed there that morning to do its thing. As the second hand ticked away, he closed his eyes and spun the little hourglass in his hand twelve times and took a deep breath. He could feel his body beginning to produce obscene amounts of adrenaline and his magic rise up.

The little clock struck midnight and the alarm began ringing loudly in the stone chamber, causing Harry to expel all his breath in an instant and release the hourglass, turning backwards in time.

Midnight – Now Sunday, Nov, 21 Hogwarts: Chamber of Secrets

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13:00 – Saturday, Nov, 20 – Hogwarts: Great Hall

"I just don't really think a whole day of this really makes sense," Ron grumbled as a large portion of the student body remained in the Great Hall after lunch.

"It actually makes a fair bit of sense," Hermione admitted. "We just ate and have all that energy. As long as we're not doing a lot of physical moving around, then why not use it to help us with spellwork?"

"You're just sayin' that because he promised you could be a teaching assistant," Ron snorted. "I'd rather be taking a nap right now, or maybe playing some chess. But there's no way I'm lettin' some Slytherins get ahead of me."

Hermione rolled her eyes as Harry took the teachers' dais. "Alright everyone! I'm personally ahead on my homework and have most of the day free, so I am going to be here all day helping anyone who needs it on any charms they've got while trying to teach you a more advanced form of the shields you've learned so far. What you've learned are things you have to hide behind. You can't run and keep a simple 'Protego' active. They don't work that way. What I'm going

to teach you now is a shield that can move with you. This is what you may use when you're covering for someone to get out of harm's way or to get to them to help them."

"What are the wand movements?" Terry Boot asked from Ravenclaw.

"No wand movements," Harry said simply. "No incantation, either."

"What!" Multiple voices cried out. The rabble died down rather quickly when Harry held up his hands before he smirked. "Hermione, if you would?"

"Obscura converti! (Invert Sight)" A white light dashed towards Harry who held out his wand and a U-shaped case of what looked like what showed up, only for one end to take the spell and send it out the other like a funnel out of the Great Hall windows and into the midday sky.

"As you can see, this wasn't the simple dome shape. I can actually make this shield whatever shape I want by imagining it. I could have launched the enemy's spell right back at them or use it to block myself while sending cover fire for an ally all at once. The only problem with this shield is not that it is complicated, but that you have to also imagine it not moving, or the impact of any spells can knock it back into you or just shatter it."

"How do you do it?" Boot asked.

"This is something you command your magic to do. There are no spells or wand movements because this is you controlling your magic, not simply letting the spell do it all for you. It's not as easy, but you get a lot more flexibility out of it. I've got a few people I've been teaching this to in the last few weeks, and they'll walk around and held everyone. But first, just point your wand out, and imagine the magic coming out in whatever shape you want," Harry explained, beginning to teach everyone the foundation to what would later be wandless magic, though he didn't want them to know that yet. After all, that was going to be something he would share only with those he wanted to join him later after he felt he could garner their trust.

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14:00 – Saturday, Nov, 20 – Potter Manor: Head's Study

Harry looked at his hands as he controlled his breathing, barely remembering to keep calm. For the first time he could remember, his outfit had changed on him. As he shifted back to his home, a skill he could honestly say he had nearly forgotten about being able to use in Hogwarts, he found his outfit shifting into some sort of inky blackness that had scared him until he remembered Lora telling him something about it. War Wizard robes, or something or other. From the top of his neck down, there wasn't a single portion of his body that was visible as it was all covered in what appeared to be black metal that felt and looked like silk. The only differences in the inky blackness were red runes that were such a dark red they may as well have been black themselves. It was tight, form-fitting and he had a dark red cloak that, like the runes, was so dark it may as well have been black as well. There really was very little difference between the colors. And Harry knew, though not totally sure how, that if he brought up the cowl to the cloak, it would mask his face and voice. And he knew, beyond a doubt, that the entire thing contained runes not to assist in his own magic, but to contain his magic within him, making him invisible from any form of divining or magical gaze. Wards would not see him, as long as he had his cowl up, and they would not affect him.

On his shins and forearms, he could tell were some sort of magical weapons, but he hadn't the foggiest idea of how to use them, except the one under his right wrist. It was a little red T-shaped protuberance that hooked onto the his left glove like the head of a nail and a hammer. If he pooled his arms apart, he would have a garroting wire, he knew. He tried it, seeing how it fit. That was how he figured out what this outfit was meant for, and why he knew he couldn't go back on his actions now. He could not, no matter what he would later wish, go back on his plans. These were robes of assassins, as far as he could tell.

Shadows would stretch to cover him, hiding him in their dark embrace. Magic wards would drift around him like the waters parting before a rock, only to meld back together after passing him. He could not make noise directly. Everything he touched was quiet unless it made noise due to touching something else. He didn't even make signs in the dust or leave wet marks when the suit got wet from his drink. The water would not adhere to his armor, at all.

Harry placed his Flamebrand daggers in their sheaths and attached them to his back, under the cloak, and placed a few vials of potions, no larger than his thumb, into the belt at his waist. The Sword of Gryffindor, feeling need, would not allow itself to be placed down. It stayed at his waist, but shrunken and also hidden in the belt.

"I is ready, Master," the house elf said somberly, knowing what was about to happen and trusting in his master that it needed to be done. For this day, there would be no names. There could be nothing that hinted at who was responsible. They were 'Elf' and 'Master'. Dobby, bless his understanding soul, was also dressed in head-to-toe black, numerous pockets all over himself, each stuffed to the brim with only he knew what.

"Show me," Harry ordered.

"This is the map of Enemy One, and this is Enemy Two," Elf said, laying out carefully drawn maps in front of Master, discussing the wards, defenses and resistance to follow.

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16:45 Saturday, Nov 20 – Hogwarts: Great Hall

"You're all doing pretty good," Harry praised, surprised despite himself. Despite what he thought before, the trend he saw with the study group seemed to continue. "You younger years seem to be getting the hang of this a little faster than most of the older years, but that's probably because you haven't become totally accustomed to using a wand yet and it's easier. Whatever the case, you're doing very well. We've got fifteen minutes until dinner starts. Let's clear out of here and enjoy dinner, then I'll be ready to continue on from seven until a half hour before curfew."

Harry hopped down from the dais and walked up to his friends. "You guys did really great."

"Well, you have been showing us how to do this for few weeks now," Hermione said simply.

"Yea, but you've only practiced when the group gets together," Harry refuted. "So, it sometimes takes you half the lesson to get back to



where you ended on the previous one. You began getting it almost immediately this time."

Hermione blushed as Luna simply grinned back at Harry, having been practicing on her own as well. Usually in small ways though, such as sending a blast of her magic at Draco the other day. Plus, she was rather fond of trying to make it take the shapes of different animals. Ron, on the other hand, puffed up his chest. "Too right, mate! I've been practicing it every night."

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Is that way no one has been able to each chicken off the plate closest to you every dinner?"

Ron paled. 'Bloody hell that girl is scary smart!'

"You did real well, too, Neville! Good on you, mate!" Harry said, clapping Neville on the back.

"He did, didn't he?" Susan asked with a beaming smile, standing uncomfortably close to the nervous Longbottom scion.

"It-It's nothing," Neville said with a blush. "You've b-been teaching us, right?"

"Yea," Harry agreed with a nod, "but doing it is all you. You think you're close to being ready for the next stage?"

"He's more than ready," Susan harrumphed, turning her nose up at Harry. "He could take anything you can throw at him!"

Neville's eyes widened. "Er, let's not be too hasty, now!"

Susan rolled her eyes as Hannah giggled. Instead of responding, Susan grabbed Neville by the arm and dragged him to her best friend while Neville looked to Harry for help that wasn't coming since Harry couldn't stop grinning like a loon.

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18:25 Saturday, Nov 20 – South Yorkshire, Leicester, Willoughby-on-the-Wolds, off Hades Ln(1)

Harry arrived at the home of Delores Umbridge, disillusioned and within her wards with the help of Dobby, who popped them over. Harry remained silent as he wandered through the woman's home and had to really wonder if she was actually a fan of kittens and pink, as her home was worse than Madam Puddifoot's, or if she was just seriously overcompensating for the darkness in her heart. Whatever wasn't pink in her home was either red or some shade in between and even the couches and chairs had lace doily-like cloth on them.

Harry made a very quick sweep of the house, ensuring there would be no surprises, and waited until six forty-five for the vile woman to come through her floo, just as had been her daily habit for the past few days. As soon as she came through, she was immediately stunned wandlessly and veritaserum shoved down her throat, five drops instead of the usual three, and then bound on the floor before being revived. Once awake, Harry made sure she was under before the interrogation began.

"Are you expecting anyone to arrive here tonight?" He asked, his voice still cloaked by his cowl. He would not remove it until he was gone for the night and back at Hogwarts.

"No," Umbridge answered in a monotone voice, devoid of any sign of free thought or personality.

"Are you expected to be anywhere or to contact anyone tonight?"

"No."

"What is your full name?"

"Delores Jane Umbridge."

"Do you have any hidden magical books in your home?"

"Yes."

Harry nodded to himself, deciding to continue his questioning before he took everything he wanted to keep from the woman. "Are you a Death Eater?"

"No."

"Why are you not a Death Eater?" Harry asked, having wondered that himself. He couldn't recall ever having seen the Dark Mark on the woman, but she had helped with nearly anything and everything Voldemort would have wanted.

"It was safer that I remain unmarked during the previous war and my lord has not been here to grace me with his brand."

Harry rolled his eyes, figuring as much, just because she was a horrible person. He grabbed a large roll of parchment and a fresh dicta-quill before activating them. "What are the names of every Death Eater you are aware of that has the mark?"

Harry's quill wouldn't stop moving for nearly a half hour, and then another half hour before she finished the unmarked ones.

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19:30 Saturday, Nov 20 – Hogwarts: Great Hall

"Harry, are you okay? You seem kind of nervous," Hermione asked, placing her hand on his upper arm and squeezing gently as several students meandered into the large room for Harry's next lesson.

"Yea," Harry said quietly. "I'm fine. I just decided some of those things I was telling you and Luna about the other day. It's just ... a matter of doing them now."

"Do you need any help?" Hermione asked simply, hoping to ease his discomfort somehow. "You know we'll help you with anything."

Harry smiled warmly, wishing that were the case. "I ... not with this," he said looking down. "But I may ask for help later," he finished quietly.

Hermione's brow knitted together in worry, but she nodded, not asking for clarification or more information. She had been trying to be less bossy and demanding for him since the summer, and she was making progress, no matter how much she wished she weren't. "Anything, Harry. Anytime. You only need to ask."

"Thanks," Harry said, smiling at Hermione and hugging her far more tightly than normal. He was not really looking forward to what he

would have to do later. But he knew it had to happen. And he was the only one who could make the decisions, and who could know about them.

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20:48 Saturday, Nov 20 – Residence of D. J. Umbridge

Harry checked one last time to ensure he had grabbed all of the books, potion ingredients, prepared potions, magical items that could be worth keeping and had them all placed in his moleskin pouch where he could take off with it all without worrying about losing whatever knowledge may have been in those tomes. The scary thing is that the woman had close to fifteen hundred books on magic, and by her own admittance, most of them were stolen or purchased from someone who stole them. She apparently had a nasty habit of employing Fenrir Grayback to end various magical families in order to 'acquire' their magical knowledge from those such as the Lupins, who a previous law would not allow them to officially, which meant legally, maintain their own magical libraries once the only heir was a half-breed with no chance of a 'proper' heir. Nearly two hundred books were from that family, alone.

Harry waited while Umbridge finished her floo call before continuing. He had placed the woman under an imperius to speak with Lucius Malfoy about rather mundane things, but ensured the conversation lasted closer to a half hour. Harry knew they could track floo activity, but nothing for sure about length of time or if they could check what was said, but he planned to say that they could determine the length of time the floo was open, but not what was said. However, if they did see what was said, then it would be a bonus, since Umbridge was under orders to stress various key words to implicate Lucius Malfoy while talking about things that could be of a dubious nature. The fact that they had something already set up to talk about was simply to be expected.

Once everything was finished, Harry planted evidence about a plot with Lucius Malfoy to eliminate Narcissa and Draco and run away with her while it was, according to this false evidence, her place to acquire money from various people, mostly through blackmail and extortion. He then walked with Umbridge to her room, making her get dressed in her night clothes, while standing outside of the room

until she was finished and under the blankets. He then pulled out the Flamebrand daggers and told her to close her eyes.

He made cuts at her shoulders, ankles and belly, staying only long enough to watch the cuts begin to smoke and smolder before eating away at her body before he made one final slit under her chin and turned around, walking out of the door and out of the house even as he heard her begin to scream as the pain overrode his imperius and she realized she was already dead. When she looked for her wand, it was gone, already in Harry's sack of stolen items.

"Master, I is being ready to take you to Target Two, now," Dobby said, looking forward to this next one. 'Master Harry Potter Sir is such a great wizard for getting rid of bad witches and wizards before they could be hurting people!'

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20:49 Saturday, Nov 20 – Hogwarts, Great Hall

"Alright everyone! You did really well today! If you have any questions, remember I'm always available and we should be ready again next Friday since Saturday is the Ravenclaw versus Hufflepuff match!" The two Houses in question roared at the very public declaration of their game.

"There's about ten or fifteen minutes to curfew, so try not to be late heading to your common rooms! No one wants to risk a detention before the game." Harry got down from the dais as Professor Flitwick approached him, practically hopping on his feet.

"Oh, good show, Mister Potter! Where on earth did you ever learn to cast shields like that?"

"Er, honest, it was when I fought Quirrell," Harry admitted with a wince, which was mirrored by the diminutive man and Hermione who was standing close enough to walk with Harry to their common room. "When I fought him, I didn't really have much I could do, and my magic just kind of came out and acted like fire. Like, when it gets hot and is white because of it."

"I'm so sorry you had to face that, Mister Potter," Flitwick said, sounding sincere.

"Eh, it's not a problem, Professor. He was the first person I've had to kill at Hogwarts, but he wasn't the last." Harry winced when he realized that sounded rather ... bad. "Er, well, I guess you can count that thing from last year. It was part of a soul, it said."

Flitwick paled, knowledge coming to mind about that little slip. "Er, well, hopefully you won't be forced to do so again, Mister Potter."

Harry shrugged. It was too late, by this point. But he wasn't going to tell his teacher that. "It's been something each year up to this point, Professor. And if you ask Dumbledore, you'll learn I'm not done yet." Without much else, Harry walked with Hermione to their common room, catching up with Ron at the door and Luna sidling up to them after they left the room. He didn't really say anything else until he asked to be left behind while he visited the loo, checking his watch as he entered.

20:56

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20:55 Saturday, Nov 20 – Kingswood in Maidstone, off Lenham Rd

Dobby immediately took out the two naked elves that attempted to kill him and Master Harry Potter Sir, knocking both out. It was actually not very difficult at all since their treatment by Lucius Malfoy had them weaker by far than they should have been. One those two were unconscious and their magics temporarily bound, along with their bodies, Dobby conjured them simple blankets and covered them before rushing forward as Harry walked carefully through the building of Malfoy Manor.

Harry first found Narcissa, asleep in her own room which was oddly separate from her husband's. Harry placed a hand onto her and sent a quick stunner into her body before throwing her over a shoulder and meeting with Dobby in the library, which was strangely absent of any books. Dobby already had his previous master unconscious and had apparently dropped the man on his head a few times.

"There is being no one else in the house, Master," Dobby stated confidently.

"Very good, Elf," Harry said, binding both Malfoys to their chairs after ensuring their wands were not upon them anywhere. "Bind their magic, just in case, and make sure there's nothing in this room that can record what happens or alert anyone to anything."

"It is already done, Master," Dobby said, not bothering to explain he had already looked for that when robbing Lucius of everything the elf felt belonged to his master.

Harry administered the potions first to Narcissa, then to Lucius, finding out both were loyal to themselves first and no one second. Lucius, it seemed followed Voldemort because his political skills allowed him great benefits from his dark lord, which would continue even after Voldemort took over. He also felt it amusing that the dark lord would eliminate his enemies for him rather than doing the dirty deeds himself, though he still enjoyed doing so on occasion, it would seem. Narcissa loved her son, truly, but would forever look for the betterment of her family by whatever means necessary while Lucius wanted to rule everything, but not as a figurehead that was at risk of assassination, but from the shadows where it was safer and there was always a patsy to blame things on.

When Harry questioned for anything he could take, he found out someone had been robbing the Death Eater, which was where Dobby admitted to being the one to do it and having finished the day before.

Harry took a handful of hair from both Malfoys before hesitating only a moment before he killed them both with the Flamebrand daggers. This time, however, he waited for the bodies to become the lump of melted flesh and char he could remember Ron being in one of his memories before he was able to vanish the bodies like regular rubbish.

Then he fell to his knees and hurled, throwing up everything he had eaten that day. For ten long minutes, he heaved, and then dry heaved, before finally magicking the mess clean and checking the time on a clock on the wall over the desk.

23:41

Harry gave Dobby his orders before shifting to Hogwarts, into the bathroom he was in hours earlier, and turned back time three hours

and waited for his younger self, who would leave from the loo to the Chamber of Secrets. The only difference was that he would leave his time-turner for his younger self to find and his altered clothes would, by the time he exited the bathroom, be back to normal where he would exchange it for the same one later on so as not to create a paradox.

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20:56 Saturday – Nov 20 Hogwarts: 6th floor Bathroom

Harry entered the Gryffindor common room just as curfew had passed and went to the couch where Hermione and Luna were sitting while Ron was attempting to win at chess while Dean and Seamus teamed up against him. He sat next to Hermione and simply stared into the fire, listening to the many people in the room talk animatedly while he stared into the fire for what felt like only an instant before he heard someone's voice.

"Harry?" Hermione asked, gently nudging the boy.

Harry jumped slightly in surprise, noting that nearly everyone else had already gone to bed and Hermione and Luna were simply waiting for Lavender and Parvati to fall asleep before heading up. "Sorry, I must have zoned out. What's up?"

"We've been trying to get your attention for the last hour, off and on," Luna said. "You've basically ignored everyone who said goodnight and just stared into the fire."

Harry looked at his watch, noting that it was almost midnight, when his younger self would leave. Harry had been awake for an additional twelve hours, now, and was unable to get over knowing what he had done that night. He had just made Draco an orphan, killed three people...

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked, grabbing his hand in hers. "We're here if you need us, you know that, right?" She asked quietly.

Harry swallowed as he looked into the fire, unable to say anything. He didn't really know what to say. What he did was horrible, even if it was necessary. But, he couldn't tell them about any of it. Really, it was illegal. The fact that it wasn't officially a time of war yet didn't



really mean much. They had to die. They couldn't be allowed to make things happen like they had. They wouldn't be the last ones, either.

"Is there anything you need, Harry?" Luna asked, wondering why Harry suddenly looked so vulnerable that night.

"Can you stay with me tonight?" Harry asked after a moment. "Please," he asked again, looking to both girls shocked faces. What shocked them even more than asking to spend the night with him was when a tear rolled down his cheek, showing how badly he really needed some sort of comfort, even though neither girl really knew why.

"Not in your dorm," Hermione finally agreed after a few seconds. "Let's get your map and go to the Room of Requirement."

00:13 Sunday, Nov 21 – Hogwarts: Room of Requirement

Harry held both girls to him tightly as they snuggled up to his sides in the overly large bed. He really didn't care which of them would have stayed with him, but he needed someone, anyone, to provide him with some form of stability and comfort after what he did that day. He didn't feel ashamed of his tears, even if he did his best not to sob heavily.

Hermione and Luna looked at each other over Harry's chest as he stilled for the night, both wondering what had brought this on. Neither could ever remember him really crying. Luna had never really seen him cry at all, even a little, and Hermione had seen him sad many times, but never anything like this. Silently, they agreed to keep an eye on him and be there to try and figure out what was going on. Hermione had explained how Harry had a tendency to shut out everyone when he went into a funk like this, but this was, again, beyond her experience.

Both girls held him tightly as they fell asleep, enjoying the comfort for what it was and deciding to be there when he chose to open up to them.

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'Open up my arse,' Hermione grumbled mentally as Wednesday rolled around and she found herself in the company of Luna and Ron once again without Harry anywhere around. There was something truly and disturbingly wrong with him. She woke up that morning with Luna as was normal, but when it came time to go to breakfast, Harry wasn't in the tower. Nor was he in the Great Hall when she and the other two arrived. Sunday, he had pulled away from everyone, and Monday and Tuesday he hadn't spent more than a few minutes in the Great Hall at all and barely ate. He had begun to speak less in general and usually, when he was around herself or Luna, he was cuddly as hell, but then was somehow just gone.

Hermione was really unsure of what was going on. And Luna wasn't any surer, either. She just knew he was hurting greatly, which Hermione could already tell, thank you very much!

"Good morning, Harry," Luna said quietly as she looked at Harry, almost pitifully, like a beaten puppy wondering what it had done wrong when all it wanted was love and affection. Hermione refused to think that her face may look the same.

"Morning," Harry said simply, sitting and pulling a few items of food to his plate. He wasn't really hungry and the only reason he was there was hoping no one would get worried about him. He played with his food more than ate it.

"Harry, please talk with us," Hermione pled, hoping to get him to talk. "Why are you pulling away like this?"

Harry didn't answer and simply stared at his eggs, pushing them around with his fork.

Hermione sighed as the owls brought the newspapers and daily mail, paying the knut for her copy and opening it up, only to gasp in shock.

**Murder Most Foul!**

By: Allowin Lyez

It was discovered yesterday that a prominent and powerful member of the Ministry had been murdered in her own home. Delores Jane Umbridge, 48, did not show up for work on Monday and all attempts

to contact her via floo and owl were non-responsive. When the same happened on Tuesday, a concerned clerk visited her home to check her health, only to find her dead in her own bedroom, apparently a victim of some kind of heat or fire curse.

"It's terribly sad to see such a wonderful woman the victim of some heinous act of violence," Minister Fudge is quoted as saying. "It shows there are always going to be criminal elements in our society and that is why our Aurors are some of the best trained in their fields. We'll be performing a full investigation and track down whoever's done this and make sure that justice has been fulfilled!"

When asked if Miss Umbridge had any enemies, the Minister admitted to being late for an important meeting and was unable to offer a comment. But one must wonder exactly who could get past Ministry-level defensive wards without alerted them.

Investigation into the matter shows no forcible entry and the Aurors say they found no wand signatures other than Umbridge's own, suggesting that she may have actually possibly done this to herself. At the same time, however, there appeared to be some kind of situation in regards to paperwork found in her office as that area, rather than the crime scene itself, is where most activity was taking place.

Also, it was found that the last floo activity except for Ministry attempts to contact her, was to the Malfoy residence from eight thirty to nine. Attempts to get into contact with the Malfoy family have been impossible. There has been no contact and owls addressed refuse to take flight. Even the house elves have not answered the floo.

"Whoa, you think Malfoy's parents did it?" Ron asked from beside Harry, making Hermione glare at him.

"Ron, really! If it was them, then they wouldn't have gone about it very well, would they?" Hermione noticed Harry flinch, but couldn't understand why.

"Well, they're evil!" Again, Hermione noticed Harry flinch. "Only an evil person kills another person! And look at the paper! They can't get a hold of them, so they probably escaped the country or something!"

Hermione was really wondering why Harry was flinching. Taking the facts she got from the paper, she realized it was when they were having their meeting, or the morning after when she and Luna were with Harry. The woman died at the same time, roughly, that the Malfoys have been missing. Other than that? She couldn't figure out how it all fit. Still, she couldn't let Ron's comments slide.

"Ron, aurors kill people. Are they evil?"

"No, but that's their job! They don't get their jollies from it!"

"And there's nothing to prove they did it, either!" Hermione verbalized frustratedly. Why, oh why, couldn't Ron have matured like Harry over the summer? It would be infinitely easier to talk to him. She had a hard time holding a conversation for more than five minutes with him at this point. She was sure of it! She timed it!

"They're whole family is Slytherin. What do you expect? They're the house of the cunning!" Ron stage-whispered while pointing to his own head. "It's how they think! Of course they won't get caught!"

Hermione considered responding, but decided to scoff in disgust and shake her head instead. It was much easier and, hopefully, he wouldn't keep arguing about it. That seemed to work about half the time.

Luna, however, had been watching Harry from the moment the paper had arrived. She had seen many guilty consciences in her years of being able to people watch. She didn't know what, or how, but Harry was feeling guilty about everything in that article. Still, whatever it was, he was Harry. If he was related to anything happening in that for any reason, then they were good reasons, she was sure. She would wait and see if he needed to talk to her or Hermione, or if they would have to go to him, first. But, there was nothing that said a little push in the right direction didn't hurt.

"Harry," Luna said quietly, getting Hermione's attention since the girl wanted to ignore Ron. "You can speak with us about anything. Even if you think you can't, we will honor your wishes and we trust you. Even if we don't understand your actions sometimes."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Harry as his shoulders slumped in his 'relieved' pose, making her think Luna figured something out and she was missing it, but Harry was still thankful for it. 'But what the hell is 'it'?'

"Thanks, Luna," Harry said just as quietly, not really being able to be heard over the rumble of the Great Hall. But both girls were growing more competent in reading Harry's lips. It was a growing need when he began to mumble to himself during homework more often.

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[Author's Note:] – Next chapter: Christmas! The relationship is official! Manipulation!

(1) Willoughby-on-the-Wolds, off Hades Ln – This is a real address, or at least, a real road name in that area. I felt it was definitely worth using. I did not give a house address for two reasons. 1) I didn't want to use someone's real address and somehow manage to find out that person actually reads this and 2) I figure she would live in that general area, perhaps, but would not actually have a muggle home, thus, she is warded so as not to be found by muggles, but is in a roughly muggle area since you can't exactly hide from them entirely.

## Chapter16 – Trinity

Ship: H/Hr/L, Nev/Sus B

Rating: M

Warnings: Character Death, Murder, Darker Events, Suggestive Language, Brief Nudity

Key: "Speech", 'Thoughts', "Speech laden with magic", §Parseltongue§

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[Author's Note:] - Some of the history during fifth year and after is altered slightly, mainly to more justify Harry's actions against Umbridge and the Malfoys.

If you review and want a reply, you should remember that you can't have private messaging turned off, nor can you review as anonymous and expect one. I do not generally respond to reviews in-chapter, and only do so if I think it is required for the majority.

Recommended Story of the Chapter: "Harry Potter and the Temporal Beacon" by willyolioleo (H/Hr, anything else is subject to change – Think of this as time-travel using a save point as in an RPG game.)

xXx STORY xXx

Amelia greeted her secretary, an efficient, loyal thing that had a backbone made of the same steel as her own, and opened her door, almost immediately snapping her wand out of its holster and holding steady on a shorter man with pale brown hair and a rather intimidating gaze. "Croaker," Amelia huffed, putting her wand away and closing the door. "How the hell did you get past Emily?"

"It's my job, Amelia," Croaker said with a small smile, his almost scary gaze turning impressively genial and warm. Like a cloak, the hard-ass, scary, Unspeakable side of him was put aside and the grandfatherly friend Amelia knew best was there before her.

"Can I safely assume you've got something for me?" Amelia asked, sitting behind her desk and double-checking her security wards, ensuring there was no active foreign magics at work other than her own and the ones she recognized as Croaker's work. Their complexity was far beyond her understanding, but she and this man had been through too much to doubt each other, and he had even bounced her on his knee when she was a baby. This man had been like a father or uncle to her and loyalty ran strong between them. So, she trusted his work, especially since he always took them down with him as he left.

"Theories, mostly," Croaker grunted, sitting in the chair across from her. "As you know, we didn't have a single wand signature in the repository. We did find a large amount of magic used, but it turns out it's all the same. It was a single person who was down there."

"Powerful or a device, do you think?" She asked with a frown. "Whoever it was had to move fast as hell. He was never seen, heard or any alarms tripped."

"No way of telling for sure, but we suspect device. They didn't actually have to be very fast since that fool Fudge had all of us working like your average filing clerk looking for who those bloody Founders' heirs were. The fact he says he knew it all along is a might suspicious, too. But, the way the books were set up, there were a few hollowed sections in the book pile that caved in when they were moved. We suspect it was a form of targeted area portkey or something similar."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it was obvious some of those books were missing," Croaker said with a shrug. "In the whole pile, some left and others didn't. We think they were all piled up and some of the books had markers on 'em to be activated and teleport a small amount around it away, so they were tryin' to get all the books they could in a single go."

"What use would something like that be?" Amelia mused to herself.

"Well, it worked well enough for books, didn't it?" Croaker asked rhetorically. "And if you put those buggers in a pile of gold in Gringotts, then you could really make off with a lot, 'specially if they

can be marked without any obvious signs and you give a bunch of galleons time to get across in various people's vaults."

"Could it not have just been the way the books had been moved and set there?" Amelia asked. "From what I understand, it wasn't a neat pile, so it could have just been the way they fell."

"Not likely since some of the books seem to keep disappearing."

"What do you mean?" Amelia growled out.

"Just that. Some of the books randomly seem to disappear. No rhyme or reason. Started the other day. They just kind of faded away. One of my men saw it and said it was like it just faded. Not like a normal portkey or anything. Seems to be a new magic at play and we checked the books. There were no signs of active magic or tags of any sort. Just some magic residue on each, and it's fading."

"Just what we need," the Director sighed. "New magic and someone who can get past blood wards that have stood up to nearly a full thousand years of use. What about the time-turner theft? Please tell me you've got some new news," she almost begged.

"Not that you'll like," he led, getting a sharp look from the younger girl. "Same magical signature as in the repository."

"I thought you said there wasn't a signature."

"Not a wand signature, but raw magical identity. We wouldn't have been able to tell even that much except that the amount of power used was so great. We've nothin' to compare it to and since there was no specific signature, it's more like a smell or flavor rather than a definitive shape, so we've no way to compare it to anything except itself. And it'd be different any time we tried even if we found the right person since this version is weakening all the time. Like a smell fading in the wind."

"Damn."

"The Potter boy also seems to have made friends with the Minister as well," Croaker hedged. "A few of my men are concerned with what he may lead the boy or that he may attempt to manipulate him."



Amelia frowned for a moment before shaking her head. "Odd as it seems, I don't think we have to worry about that. Potter's got a good head on his shoulders. From what I understand, he's managed to actually manipulate Fudge, not the other way around. He's damn-near obsessed with protecting his friends. And it isn't an act, surprisingly enough," she said.

"A threat?" Algernon Croaker asked gruffly, his brown eyes narrowing as the hard-ass Unspeakable came to the fore.

"Not to us," Amelia assured. "He talked Fudge into providing an exemption order as you read in the papers so they could protect themselves with impunity."

"They already could," Croaker said slowly, tilting his head. "Why would he go through the trouble for something that is already provided?"

"You know as well as I do that the Ministry in general has adopted a no-tolerance policy in that regard for muggleborns and most half-bloods," Amelia admonished. "They've been telling students for the past few decades that they can't use magic for any reason and those that defend themselves with it have a tendency to be denied a real chance to defend themselves if there isn't an of-age magical to defend them."

"I was under the impression that was being taken care of," he grumbled. Croaker was unable to keep watch in every aspect and, if he were honest with himself, this was one of those places that he willingly paid less attention to and didn't see as important as other things simply because it wasn't. One child here or there using magic to defend themselves wasn't so bad since it rarely happened compared to the potential risk of the corruption or evil that could happen at the Ministry at any time if there were not diligent watchers.

"Most kids know not to carry their wands to be tempted, so it isn't as big of a deal these days," Amelia sighed, "but it still happens. And since it isn't my specific detail, but the obliviators', I can't really control it."

"We're getting off track," Croaker sighed. "I looked at those memories you gave me from the boy. You were right. There was something very sinister about that book."

"What?" Amelia asked, intrigued. It was rare you got to learn about something so forbidden that even the Master Unspeakable was hesitant to so much as bring it up.

"First, you saw who gave the book to the girl?" He asked.

"Malfoy," she grunted. "I thought Potter was just showing me Lockhart, but I couldn't figure out about the fight with Malfoy and Arthur. After seeing the memory where the house elf was given the diary, I realized that Malfoy was the one to put it in her cauldron at the store."

"Right in one. So, for the sake of clarity, it came from the Death Eater bastard. It was, as stated, a possession of the man we knew to become the Dark Lord of our time. What you saw taking the girl's life wasn't a memory or charm, but a portion of the bastard's soul."

"What!" Amelia gasped, causing Algernon to nod sadly.

"Potter's right, Amelia. The dark tosser isn't dead. He really did fight him in his first year, a version of him from second and who knows what else he may not have shown you. Those devices ... they bind a person to this world, keeping them from crossing over."

"Are you telling me that twisted mind is going to be coming back?" Amelia asked, pale and near trembling.

"He obviously tried two years ago and last year. One of his minions has escaped Azkaban for Merlin knows what," Croaker shrugged. "I don't know how many he's made, but if that diary wasn't the only one, then it's going to be damn hard to find and kill the bastard."

"Fuck me," Amelia groaned, holding her head in her hands.

Croaker bit back the obvious retort and sighed. "I'd recommend accepting Potter's offer for that thing you were talking about. If Voldemort does come back, you'll need a method of escape he can't shut down. You'd be a prime target if he goes by his previous methods or gets worse."

"You realize with that memory, if we can find Lucius, we can drag his sorry ass in here and pump him full of veritaserum?" Amelia grinned darkly.

"Want me to send a scouting party to see what can be found in their manor?"

"Not yet," Amelia warned him off. "If he is there, we'd still have to break down the wards to find out. Narcissa would never leave her son, so we'll watch and follow him come the Christmas holidays. I've already had Dumbledore put tracking charms on everything Draco owns, including his wand and even a few on his toes so his shoes will hide any attempts to find the telltale glow."

"He actually did it?" Croaker asked, aghast. "He never accepted anything like that before. He'd go on about having faith in the little bastard."

Amelia shrugged. "Benefit of being seen talking to Harry Potter in the Wizengamot chambers, I suspect. Either that, or all those tracking charms are on something and he's pulled the wool over our eyes. We'll know in a month or so."

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Harry sighed as he entered the Atrium of the Ministry the day after the article in the Daily Prophet. Getting away from Luna and Hermione had been a little more difficult than normal considering they didn't believe him at first that he was actually leaving and were obviously worried he was going to go and brood somewhere for a reason they couldn't fully understand since, in their eyes, this was in response to his heritage coming out and a few angry mutterings from the school populace in general about his ability to get around the underage laws for not only himself, but others as well. It also didn't help that Hermione felt Luna was aware of something that she, herself, had missed when she was still the better of the two at reading Harry. Had she been willing to ask, Luna would have explained what she had seen and what she thought it meant since she saw not only Harry, but the world around him as well whereas Hermione knew simply how to understand him. But, she wanted to figure Harry out on her own. To do otherwise was unacceptable to the bushy-haired brunette.

Harry was ... disappointed in his reaction to killing three people. He had done it before. First year, he'd killed Quirrell and didn't so much as bat an eyelash. At least until he realized later in the summer what he had actually done. And in truth, there were a few people he was fairly sure he had killed in the later skirmishes with Death Eaters, but none of those had been so ... methodical or brutal. They weren't cold and calculated. They had sought him out, not him looking for them. That, apparently, made a huge difference. The three he had killed had been defenseless, even if they were angry, murdering, thieving, rapists who took joy in torturing innocent people simply because they could.

In truth, Narcissa Malfoy was really the only one he had felt somewhat bad about having to kill rather than the methods he had used. She was a bad person, but even though she didn't have the mark and never tried to kill him, she admitted, under veritaserum, to being willing to do so if her husband or the dark lord ordered her to. And worse, with Lucius dead, it would have fallen to her shoulders to continue greasing palms and paying off people since many would be able to turn on the family, getting them all thrown into Azkaban. And she was one of the ones aware of Voldemort's eventual resurrection. She had been privy to the details of exactly what the diary had been since Lucius had found it quite the honor to keep the item safe and had bragged to her.

She had even been the one to suggest Ginny as the target as anything other than a pureblood was out of the question or, failing in finding an opportune moment, Pansy Parkinson, thus making the Dark Lord the Dark Lady who was magically bound to marry Draco since that same contract made the female of the relationship subservient to the male. That would mean their darling son would have actually ruled over the eventual ruler of the wizarding world. Ambitious and cunning a plan if ever there had been one. With Draco in power, he could even ensure their own safety from the obvious betrayal.

So, while she hadn't killed or done anything serious, she was going to. She already knew what her plans would have been in many 'worst-case' scenarios, expecting one of Lucius' many shady dealings to go south and leave her a widow in a precarious position with a son and a large number of evil associates who would turn all the evil-doing of her husband into blackmail to get what they wanted.

So, she had plans in case anything like that ever came about. Narcissa kept her beauty and youthful appearance using several potions, many of which were illegal and generally required young sacrifices of one sort or the other and acted like a proper lady while doing small things to entice, but never appear promiscuous or out-of-the-ordinary for their society so she could have a steady list of possible suiters. She would take on a husband or two who were wealthy, gain their holdings and then mysteriously become a widow, all while crying about fearing of being cursed, which many would believe considering the family she was in. Once she could acquire no more suitable men, or until the dark lord returned, she would then become an asset to whoever she needed to serve, her lord or her son.

The only exception would be if she found a match suitable to her social standing as Lucius had been. He was evil, yes, but in her eyes, he kept her in a station of comfort she felt entitled to and deserving of while not expecting her to bed him any more than necessary. Narcissa enjoyed sex, but highly preferred to be the one in charge and able to lay back and enjoy rather than do any work towards the end goal just as Lucius did. For a woman who fully believed in the pureblood dogma, she was quite fond of controlling muggle men to do her bidding.

While Narcissa went into the muggle world to establishments of glistening crystals and twinkling accents to pick up her men, she and Lucius allowed each other to keep a stable of their prizes when they found one they wished to keep. Narcissa had proven to be one smarter than Lucius, however, in that she made those wealthy men pull out all their money and valuables and she would later get it converted to wizarding currencies and hidden away from her husband in case she ever had cause to flee.

In the end, Narcissa had eight different contingency plans in the case of various situations should something happen to Lucius and each one more brutal and colder than the last.

Harry simply couldn't allow her to live on. She was much like Bellatrix in her devotion and beliefs. Only Narcissa was more subtle, circumspect and cunning. She was a true Slytherin in every way. It ran in her family and, to be honest, her plans began even before her birth.

Why else would a dying family have five children when most pureblood homes had no more than two, and usually only one? Only the Weasleys were the obvious exception to that rule. Even when she was still Narcissa Black, her family had been putting plans into motion to resurrect their flailing family.

Powerful fertility potions were used to ensure conception in hopes of daughters, though potions specifically for that had been used after the second son. It was decided that the Black family would use their remaining wealth and heritage to place their daughters into wealthy families, then those daughters would have a single son to inherit, also using potions to ensure such a thing. From there, they were a mere single accident away from those daughters then keeping the family name, but giving everything they acquired back to the Black family, keeping those pureblood names simply for the political clout they will have hopefully married into. That was why the Black family had so many children when they were nearing status as paupers.

It was an ingenious plan, but one that fell apart when their Head of House, Arcturus Black, was killed and thus, unable to bring them back into the family as Blacks. Since Regulus' loyalty to his family was so strong, he had worked to stop Voldemort from coming to power and died for his act of devotion, so he was unable to take up the Lordship and Sirius was disowned by their mother, even though it had never been official. Of course, since he was in prison, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. And he wasn't aware of the plan to begin with, being a bloody Gryffindor. He simply couldn't be trusted.

Sadly, the plan didn't stop falling apart there, but continued with Andromeda, the oldest, falling in love with a muggleborn and taking a potion to ensure a female, just to snub their parents after being disowned herself, so they couldn't use any sons as potential heirs to whatever they gained in their life together. Of course, a subtle muggle poison to their father ensured he wouldn't be around to pursue her new husband's death.

And Bellatrix was simply far too crazy to predict. Her fanatical devotion to the Black family had shifted to Voldemort, thus making her abandon the Black Family plan and putting her entire being into his plans instead, which also meant no children as far as Narcissa was aware. She was also a complete and total submissive to the strongest power she could find. That had, growing up, been her father. She would do anything and everything he desired if he but

hinted. When Voldemort rose to power, it attracted her like a niffler to precious metal. It was mere luck on behalf of the Blacks that Bellatrix had never seen Dumbledore use his full power before Voldemort came along or she would have been the weapon of the Light that her family would have been ashamed to have bred and trained.

So, Narcissa chose to continue the plan, amassing all the wealth and power that she could. Extra plans were made, money was stockpiled, rare and powerful artifacts were hidden away while magical tomes were copied and all of it hidden from Lucius in fear that he may take it for his own gains rather than allow it to go to the Black family as it was meant to. She had few worries about getting back into the Black family until she was visited late in the night by Harry Potter. Her son was the closest Black by blood and had equal chance to gain the lordship once Sirius passed away as Harry himself, as Sirius' godson. But, with Sirius in prison, that right could easily be contested and, with enough money, Draco could obtain it, thus taking Narcissa back into the fold and bringing the family back to glory while maintaining the Malfoy name himself for the political power that came with it. And if the Potter boy had an accident before Sirius' death, all the better. Since Sirius was never officially disowned, he technically held the Lordship, but once she felt she had enough money, she could arrange another simple accident. Well, until the bastard escaped. That had made it a waiting game.

There was no way Harry could think of to explain all of this without coming clean with what he did and what his victims said, even though he found that he really did want to. This was a burden he didn't think he could keep to himself. He wanted to hear someone else say he had chosen the right path. He knew Dumbledore wouldn't. The man wanted to redeem everyone. He would not have only not approved, but would probably magically ensure Harry couldn't go out on his own again.

That was one reason he had elected to send a letter to Moody, despite the truth in needing actual instruction. The man would know what needed to be done and would agree with him, even if Harry didn't have to come out and say what he had done.

Harry entered the lift after registering at the wand counter and getting his ticket and rode up the Minister's office.

He had actually cried over the deaths, something he hadn't felt he would ever do. Not after lovingly dreaming and fantasizing about them for so long, at least for Lucius and Umbridge. But, that was also probably why he had done it, he felt. He hoped, anyway. He had thought so long and hard about the ways to kill those two, or for them to die, and the way he did it was just so ... brutal, and drawn out.

He had made multiple cuts to make the bodies burn faster instead of the slow, festering burn it would have otherwise been. However, each cut had made him want to heave. It had almost crushed Harry and caused him to give up until he remembered Hermione under the knife and Bella laughing and taking actual enjoyment out of it. Harry had compared that to himself and came out with a grudging acceptance. He was not a monster. While he was happy they were gone, he had not taken pleasure out of performing the deeds. Nor did he make it slow and torturous. What he had done had been necessary, even if there had been faster options available. The method of execution was simply using tools available to him that were less likely to be tracked, he hoped. He didn't use magic, leave prints or anything that could tie things to him. When he hurled, he had magically cleaned it, using wandless magic so as to not leave a registered trace. And Dobby had even promised to remove Harry's magic from the spot, so if anyone looked, it would actually be a void where no magic would register, even the ambient, unless given a week.

"I'm here to see Minister Fudge," Harry said, looking at the rather attractive receptionist in front of the Minister's office. She was closer to twenty than twenty-five with dark black hair and a pale complexion with naturally dark red lips, sparkling bright, blue eyes and long lashes. Her body was something reminiscent of Fleur Delacour, albeit with about twice the bust, while her voice and attitude was more in line with Percy Weasley, leaving Harry to believe Fudge kept the girl on for reasons other than her secretarial skills.

"Do you have an appointment?" The young girl asked, not looking up from her desk where she was lazily reading a Teen Witch Weekly, focusing on glamors to 'enhance' one's assets with mild compulsions to appreciate. Harry still couldn't figure out how the magazine was allowed to print those things in something meant for teens of all ages. How could all those old bitties not have problems with it?



Molly Weasley even allowed Ginny to read it, now that he thought about it. And that woman was extremely conservative.

"No, but Minister Fudge said I didn't require one if I ever wanted to visit with him," Harry said, raising an eyebrow as the girl huffed and looked up at him with a nasty expression on her face.

"Everyone requires an appointment if – Oh!" The girl squeaked and hopped in her seat even as her eyes widened comically as she realized who she was speaking with. "Harry Potter!"

"And you are?" Harry drawled out, deciding against getting annoyed that his fame was working for him this time.

"I-I'm Angelica Kravitz," she said with a bright blush and small smile that had ensnared Corny, as she had taken to calling the Minister in private. She drew her shoulders back and pushed her chest forward a little while wrapping her arms under her breasts, pushing them up a little and shook just enough to get a jiggle. 'Bless male hormones,' she thought giddily.

'Oh, come on! I'm thirteen bloody years old!' Harry bit back his initial retort and simply smiled, making very sure to keep his eyes on her own since the sight provided didn't interest him in the slightest. "Could you at least ask if Cornelius would take a visitor?"

"O-Of course! One moment, sir," she said, getting up slowly and walking to the door, swaying far more than she should. Harry couldn't be sure, but he was almost positive she was in the middle of transfiguring her shirt to be tighter and to drop the neckline as she moved.

'I wonder what her face would look like if I told her I was gay...' he wondered, ultimately deciding the last thing he needed was for that kind of story to get around.

"He'll see you now," Angelica said, motioning for Harry to enter the office.

As Harry entered, Fudge met him at the door and shook his hand with a bright smile. "Ah, good to see you, Harry my boy! Angelica, please close the door and make sure I haven't any bothers while meeting with Lord Potter."

"Of course, Minister," Angelica said, giving Harry one last smile before doing as ordered while lamenting the fact that the office was warded against eavesdropping.

"Take a seat, Harry!" Fudge offered loudly. He was thrilled that Harry had come to visit him and, with his favorite mistress manning the desk, he was sure it would be around the Ministry that he was entertaining the Boy-Who-Lived within minutes. Well, unless she planned on trying to seduce him when he left so none of the other women try first ... Maybe he would watch her at the end of the conversation. "How can I help you?"

"I read in the paper yesterday about Umbridge and the Malfoys. I knew you were close to Lucius and Delores and I thought I would come and make sure you were handling things okay," Harry said, taking a subtle deep breath as he began his plan.

"Well, not that close," Fudge said, hoping Harry didn't think he had been willing to sully himself with the woman. He was Minister, for crying out loud! He had the power to be picky about who he slept with! "But, yes. It was a sad thing. I'm afraid I can't really discuss an ongoing investigation though, I'm sorry," he said, twisting a quill in his hand.

"I'm actually here to provide you some information," Harry said, getting Fudge's attention. This was where things could begin to go terribly wrong if he wasn't careful. Harry could actually feel his heart beating through his chest.

"Oh? What would you know about this heinous crime?"

"Well, nothing specific," Harry explained. "But, when I first entered the magical world when I turned eleven, I found out I was famous and why. In fact, as soon as I entered the Leaky Cauldron, I was swarmed with people who crowded in and wanted to shake my hand. There were so many I was actually almost buried in the pile of bodies and some of them even kept going back to the end of the line to shake my hand again."

"Well, you are the Boy-Who-Lived," Fudge said a little grumpily, wondering why he never got that kind of a reaction for walking into a

room. He could admit, only to himself of course, that he was a little jealous.

"Yes, but I didn't know that at the time. I actually don't enjoy my fame. When I grow up, I want to either be an auror, or maybe a hit wizard, something fun and interesting, you know?" Harry said, hinting that there would be a way to control him in the future or use him as a poster boy for the Ministry.

"Yes, yes. You mentioned something like that when we last saw each other and I ... er, showed you around," Fudge blustered, looking decidedly nervous. "You mentioned curse breaking if I recall correctly."

"Yes!" Harry beamed. "Anyway, when I found out that there were still many Death Eaters out there who may come after me, I decided to do something the muggles do and hire people to pass on information when they hear it about me. In fact, I learned my second day back that Lucius Malfoy wanted to get me."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Harry," Fudge said, looking a little green. "Lucius is a wonderful man and a paragon of-

"I have proof that he was a Death Eater and bribed his way out of going to jail," Harry said simply, shutting the small, portly man up quickly. "I also have proof that he had been doing a lot of bad things. One of those, actually, is a plan that I'm here to warn you about."

"Wha-what?" Fudge asked in a high-pitched voice. His eyes had gone rather wide, too, but Harry fought valiantly to keep a grin off his face.

"Minister Fudge, the person who contacted me said that he was hired on Friday to kill me and Delores Umbridge. But, he didn't want to, but said Lucius isn't the kind of man you tell 'no' to and expect to walk away from." Harry noted Fudge's face paled a little and he nodded slightly unconsciously. "Anyway, he agreed and took the money, but then sent me a message saying he wouldn't be contacting me again because he was taking his family and running."

"Who was this man?" Fudge asked.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I know he went by 'Finney' and he wanted me to call him 'Fin'."

"A common nickname for Phineas," Fudge said with a nod. "Did he have light brown hair that was about half gray, light brown eyes and a scar on his left cheek?"

"He may have," Harry said, wondering if he had just possibly gotten someone into trouble. Even if he did, however, there was nothing he could do. This had to happen. He briefly considered how he would once do anything in his power to make sure no one suffered for this, what Hermione called his 'saving people thing', but something like that, while noble, couldn't exist during a war. At least not for him. It had nearly broken him on far too many occasions, though he couldn't quite recall what most of them were as they had happened in different lives and it was more subconscious feelings that directed him now with a very rudimentary understanding. "It looked more like dirty blond hair to me, though and I never really noticed any scar."

"Hm. There's a man named Phineas who frequents Knockturn Alley that is a known informant. His information is always good, but he rarely leaves the alley and I don't recall him ever settling down, so I suppose that could have been a slight misdirection."

"Er, we met at Fortescue's. I was told never to go into Knockturn Alley when I first entered this world by Hagrid. He said it was too dangerous, so I've never actually been in there," Harry said, hoping this didn't make his story crash down around him and doing his best to stay away from any hints that he had ever entered that alley. There had been many witnesses, but with polyjuice and glamors, you can never be sure of what you see in this world. "But, the point is, the plan was to apparently get you out of the way, permanently, and for Lucius to run for office while bribing his way to the top. He's apparently been bribing people in the Wizengamot and others in order to make them comfortable going his way. When I heard about Umbridge and then the Malfoys disappearing, I figured I would like to help you. I try to look out for those I can call friend," Harry said, sliding a ring towards the very pale Minister.

"Wh-what's this?" Fudge asked.

"A portkey I made," Harry said. "It will shatter any standard anti-apparition wards if the person trying to go through them is not

authorized except for ones either myself or the one using it are authorized to go through. So, if you try it from your home and have those, then you can still go through without harming your wards, but it would shatter any that someone may put up to stop you. It will take you to the same place my own emergency one will go to."

"Where's that?"

"The Chamber of Secrets where I saved Ginny Weasley and killed the basilisk that was attacking people last year."

"What!" Fudge squawked. "You were the one who opened the chamber?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head. "But I found out who did. Ginny Weasley was being possessed by a dark object that Lucius Malfoy, believe it or not, gave to her. She just didn't know better because she was a child. Hagrid never opened the Chamber and didn't know anything about it."

"Tha-that's not possible," Fudge mumbled, feeling sick.

"I'm willing to offer you a magical oath, right here and now if you'll let me borrow your wand, that says I know it was Lucius. I'll swear it only on my magic so that, if I can still use it, you'll know I'm telling the truth and, if not, you will have me at your mercy to do with whatever you will."

Fudge hesitated only a moment before agreeing. The temptation of having the Boy-Who-Lived at his mercy was too great compared to the risk of giving away his wand, which never actually entered the man's mind. The fact that he needed some sort of proof to confirm that Lucius was the culprit of that situation, when the man had been the one giving Cornelius all of his advice in who to go after, was simply a plus to Harry.

"I, Harry James Potter, swear on my magic that I know Lucius Malfoy gave Ginevra Weasley the cursed diary which controlled her and caused her to set loose the basilisk onto the school. As I have sworn, so mote it be." A quick flash of light and Fudge was hurling into his wastebasket. Once finished, Harry proved he could still use magic by performing a breath-freshening charm for the Minister. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Minister."

"It's quite alright, my boy. It's just a little hard to take in." Fudge pulled out a hidden stash of rum and drank straight from the bottle, ignoring the cups from the drawer. He was conveniently accepting that proof for the Chamber issue turned into proof for this apparent plan to kill him. That one oath from Harry validated everything else to the Minister, leaving Harry relieved.

"Minister, from what I understand, he sees you as a threat and the fact that you gave me a way to protect myself and my friends really upset him. I think he was hoping to do something big, but you somehow stopped it I guess. I mean, as long as you were the one issuing his orders, you were the one who took the fall when things went bad. That's why he gave you so much money."

"I-I-I don't know-" Fudge spluttered, looking even more green.

"Please don't lie to me, Minister," Harry said calmly, with his voice as firm as he could make it. This was going to be the hard part. "I don't care if you get paid extra to pass laws as long as you don't make people suffer for it. What does it matter if people want to register pets and you get some gold to make it happen? Or to protect the people in some way? I've been given proof, but I don't really care. I'm a kid. All I really care about is having fun, flying, doing cool magic and girls. But you helped me out before and I'd like to help you out now. Here's the activation phrase," Harry said sliding a paper to the Minister.

Emergency Portkey, Activate!

"Use that if you get into trouble. I check the chamber every couple of days and the ring will let me know once it's been used. That way, I can come quickly to make sure you're okay and, if not, you have access to the hospital wing which is probably closer help than anywhere else you go unless it's straight to Saint Mungo's." Harry had, until that moment, forgotten about his hidden horcrux and all the pilfered items from the Room of Requirement. 'Crap. I need to move all of that to Potter Manor before tonight.'

"I ... Yes, okay," Fudge said, immediately placing the ring onto his finger and sighing in gratitude as the band tightened comfortably and turn invisible with a built-in disillusionment charm. "You really think Lucius would come for me?"

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "All I know is what I was told. So far, Umbridge was one of his targets. She's gone now and Lucius goes missing at the same time. I don't want to think I'm paranoid, but can you explain it in any other way?"

"No, no I can't," Cornelius said. "And I think you may still be right. We found evidence at Delores' home suggesting almost all of that as well, along with some things from others. Apparently, Lucius had threatened to curse the families of the Board of Governors last year to get Albus sacked. We've looked into that lead and it's shown to be valid."

"No!" Harry exclaimed, sounding aghast. "Did he really?" Harry struggled to keep the grin from his face. He hadn't paid much attention to when Malfoy and Dumbledore argued after the Chamber incident before he freed Dobby, but his Inner Hermione had reminded him of it when making up the plan and decided it would validate more than Harry could account for. "He isn't as subtle as he should be! I bet you've been on to him for a while now!"

"Oh yes," Fudge said, feeling it safe to confide in the boy and not above puffing up his own ego a bit. "It also suggested they had, er, adult interests in one another. Lucius was apparently meant to survive his wife and then he and Delores were going to run away together. Not sure what was to happen to his boy, Draco, I think."

"Draco has become an embarrassment to Lucius," Harry said solemnly. "Lucius is a firm believer in blood status and Draco does very poorly at school. And, if Lucius was going to run away with Delores, then he may have planned on making a, er, clean break. The muggles have crime stories where that type of thing happens a lot. I grew up on those kinds of stories, that's probably what interested me in becoming an Auror. So, it could be different, but I don't know. Right now, if anything happens, then Draco gets everything if inheritances work the same in the wizarding world with the eldest child getting everything."

Fudge nodded, agreeing. "Yes, they do. And that's very fine thinking. You may already be Auror material, Harry!"

Harry actually blushed, embarrassed not at the praise, but that Fudge was so easy to manipulate. Hermione was right in first year.

Wizards have absolutely no common sense. "Just promise never to take the ring off, even for bathing or sleeping. Those are times when a person is most vulnerable."

"I promise. No point in having the protection if you can't use it, right?"

Harry blinked, finding that surprisingly intelligent. "Right. Um, one other thing. I know this is probably something you should tell the DMLE, but since I don't want people to know I've got people looking out for my safety, would you keep this secret? I just don't know how to prove these things outside of a letter to me, which doesn't really mean anything is proven to an investigator. Fin said he was leaving the country and, if anyone learns about you getting that portkey, they may figure out how to stop it in a way I just don't know about or something. I'm still learning a lot, so I may have missed something."

"No, of course not," Fudge chuckled. "You're protecting the Minister of Magic, himself! No need to drag you or your sources into the muck!" Actually, Fudge was terrified that, if asked questions, Harry would let slip his proof of bribery. The boy was highly suggesting he was okay with such things, but the legal world was not, unless they were the ones getting the bribes, of course.

"Well, they aren't really sources," Harry said with a shrug. "Just, if they hear anything, they get paid if it turns out to be valid and were the first to provide the information. And I tend to pay very well, so they're likely to do the work and get paid for it."

"That's what sources are, my boy. But no worry, I'll keep your secret, as long as you're willing to keep secret I took you on a tour of the Department of Mysteries. Technically, you shouldn't have seen that since you don't work here, but you are a friend of mine, of course, so of course I'd show you the interesting things. Well, I need to see what I can do about the search for Lucius," Fudge said, hoping Harry wouldn't tell people what he had seen now in hopes it wouldn't get back to anyone. "If you need me, I'm here any time you want to talk." Now, all Fudge had to do was figure out how to get extra security for his home when all the Aurors and security personnel were busy scouring the Ministry for information. Perhaps he would have to ask Angelica if she was willing to work another late night. He desperately needed her talent to let off some steam and it never hurt to have an extra wand around.



"Thank you for your time, Minister," Harry said, allowing Fudge to take him to the door where they put on a show for the very attentive Angelica.

Once the door closed and Fudge was secretly writing hasty memos to certain people, Harry turned to Angelica and smiled, bowing his head and earning himself a large smile and deep blush worthy of Ginny Weasley. "Thank you for your assistance earlier, Miss Angelica," Harry said, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles while keeping his eyes on hers still, rather than the blouse which had almost lost all of its top half from the girl's transfigurations. He felt sure if she bounced in her seat or took a deep breath, he'd get his second glimpse of the female form.

"N-no problem, Lord Potter," Angelica said happily. "If you need anything that I can possibly help you with, this is my private floo address. I'd be happy to give you any assistance with any problems that may be stressful for you or deliver a message to Minister Fudge since I see him daily. I'm always at your service." The dark-haired woman was rather distressed that this boy, who should have been so hormonal he couldn't tell you what she looked like from the neck up, wasn't paying attention to her obvious charms that she was being quite a bit less subtle than she would normally be. After all, it only took a smile at Fudge to earn a position earning nearly eight times her entry-level position from nearly two months previous. Granted, she earned it mostly on her knees or back, but the job was extremely easy, well-paying and a new friendship with Missus Fudge meant she could nearly control Cornelius' 'overtime' at the Ministry. This boy just would not pay attention to what she was obviously trying to tell him! 'I think I could get him alone and rape him next time. He would enjoy that, I have no doubt.' She was honestly beginning to think that was what it would take.

Harry simply nodded once and walked away, letting his face contort into disgust once he was facing away from the girl. She was pretty, but he had seen her real personality as soon as she spoke. He may use her to get unwitting help with his Ministry Project, but there was no way in Hell he would take her up on her obvious offers.

Besides, he didn't like black hair any longer.

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"Dobby?" Harry called out after arriving home at Potter Manor. He put all of the things from the Chamber of Secrets in the ball room where there was plenty of room in case the sack he transfigured out of his list failed for some reason. It was also the one place where nothing could be damaged that he actually cared about or may need in the future. Balls may have been a big deal to the upper class or for social events, but he really didn't care at all.

"Yes Master Harry Potter Sir?" Dobby asked, popping in front of Harry and bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"How are the elves from Malfoy Manor doing?"

Dobby's ears drooped and his bouncing stopped. "They is doing better, but is still very weak. They was being hurt a lot so they is needing time to get better. They is not being awake for at least a week so they is not hurting themselves for what happened or going to their only remaining master and telling him what is happening. Dobby is already making them forget what happened and who was being involved, so Master Harry is being safe, as is Dobby."

"That's good to hear," Harry said with a heavy sigh. "Now, what did you mean last night when you said that you had taken most of what I would want from the Malfoys?"

Dobby looked both sorry and proud of himself in a strange expression on his face. "Master Harry is beating Bad Master Lucius' old master when he was being a baby. Magic says when you beat them, you is having everything from the loser and Bad Master was giving everything of his to his master. Dobby decided since Master Harry beat the loser, Master Harry is owning everything that was his, including Bad Master's things. So, Dobby go to every place Bad Master hides things and takes it all."

"So, you took everything Lucius was hiding?" Harry asked, causing Dobby to nod quickly enough to make his ears slap his face loudly. "Dobby, you're awesome! Can any of it be tracked back to us?"

"No. Dobby is finding nothing with tracking charms. He searched every piece and is finding none at all!"

"Do you think the law enforcement will be looking for any of it? I mean, Lucius was sure to tell them of the thefts..."

"Not at all! Bad Master is having almost all dark thingies! If Bad Master was to say anything was stolen, they would ask from where it was stolen and if they ask that, then they would want to know what else was stolen, and if they ask that, then they is finding out Bad Master is having many bad thingies that would get him into trouble!"

Harry ... thought he understood that. "So, he didn't want questions asked?"

"Exactly! Oh, I knew Master Harry Potter Sir was smart!" Dobby cried out gleefully, never minding that was exactly what he had told Harry. But, since it wasn't exactly what he said, it was obvious his master knew better than Dobby thought he did!

That poor elf's logic was about as linear and clear as a nest of Devil's Snare. Or Hermione's hair.

"Hm. Did you get any polyjuice potions? Or do you know where I can get some?"

"Dobby is getting some from Bad Master," Dobby said with a fast nod. "Bad Master is having many potions that Dobby has taken! Dobby put them in the medicine room!"

"That moves my plans up then, Dobby," Harry said. "I need you to scout out Fudge's house like you did for Umbridge and Malfoy, and find out Fudge's daily routine for the next couple of days, okay?"

"Dobby can be doing that!" And the elf popped away to do just that.

"That is one crazy elf," Harry muttered with a fond smile. He decided he would go ahead and buy the little guy his Christmas socks now so he didn't forget.

xXxXxXx

Albus,

I had plans of being at the Hog's Head the weekend after Christmas. I'd like you to join me.

Moody

Albus chuckled to himself after he decoded his dear friend Moody's letter. The man was paranoid to an extreme and it had taken him half an hour to decode the short missive. Still, they hadn't spoken to one another in almost three years outside of the occasional letter or very brief pleasantries when Albus would ask for his assistance in some matter. It would be nice to catch up.

With a warm heart, Dumbledore responded in the affirmative, hoping his younger brother would be willing to talk to him for once since their sister's early demise. Each year, Albus would send him something, but he never once received anything back. Nor would Aberforth say a word to him unless legally obligated to. It was never anything but a glare.

'There is always a chance he has had a change of heart,' Albus thought to himself. 'Perhaps he will give me a second chance to apologize. To prove that I have changed.'

xXxXxXx

"You can't kill him, you know," Blaise stated simply, once again in Daphne's room in the Slytherins' dungeon. The girl's silky black hair whipped around as she snapped her head over to glare at the boy, actually growling in defiance.

"Of course I can! It may be illegal, but I'm perfectly capable of it!" Growling again, Daphne once again began pacing the length of her room like a caged tiger. This had been just about all she did during her free time since she had received that thrice-be-damned letter from her father, telling her he would be proud of her if she could seduce and capture the young Lord Potter's heart, explaining how it would be a wonderful boon for the family and a powerful husband for his eldest daughter. He didn't come right out and tell her to do this, of course. He truly wanted his daughter happy. However, he more than strongly suggested it as a worthy course of action, stating striving for a perfect match is worth any embarrassment and, success or failure should she try to follow her heart, suggesting as well that she was already infatuated with Lord Potter, would be met with a week's stay at Stoven's Spa. It was a lush resort and spa that quite literally catered to your every legal desire. In the wizarding

world, there was quite a bit that was legal, and nearly every possible vice, pleasure or sin could be obtained there. Every facet was designed for opulence and aesthetic pleasure.

Long story short, it was an outright bribe.

"What about you?" Daphne continued, glaring at the slightly shorter boy. "Didn't you get a rather similar letter?"

Blaise blushed, shifting uncomfortably. "It would appear as though Mother hopes to cover any potential areas the majority of the public may ignore and asked that I simply make an inquiry to-"

"She wants you to shag the bastard," Daphne interrupted, smirking in amusement. It was wonderful to take what enjoyment she could from her friend's discomfort.

Blaise made a face that conveyed his opinions on the matter, and they weren't good. "I am to inquire subtly about his ... persuasion," Blaise corrected delicately. "If that leaning is to one side, I am to ... persuade him to meet my younger sister."

"And if it's the other?" Daphne asked in a sing-song voice.

Blaise glared at Daphne before snarkily retorting, "your father wants you to seduce Potter."

"Stay out of this!" Daphne roared, beginning to pace again, much to Blaise's amusement.

"Just ignore it," Blaise suggested with a shrug. "That's what I shall be doing."

"If I fail to persuade him, as you so delicately put it, then Astoria is supposed to try," Daphne said with a sneer. "Just in case he likes younger girls. She is supposed to outright make the attempt to the point of coming right out and making the offer."

"A common plan amongst pureblood mating rituals," Blaise referenced. "It's the very reason I am to work at introducing him to Miranda. It's been done for generations and one my own mother has grown quite accustomed to."

"It's my little sister, Zabini!" Daphne hissed, looking to the boy who was quickly becoming the enemy. "She's shy and far less self-assured of herself than I am. She puts on a show in public like she's been taught, but that's also why she doesn't stay out much. She can't keep it up. She'll get nervous and then she'll bend and if she's forced to accept Potter's advances, she won't be able to keep up with him! Not the way he's been this year! Last year's Potter, maybe! He was practically worse than Longbottom. This Potter, however, would sense the weakness and ..." Daphne stopped speaking, shaking in rage at the things she was envisioning at that moment. The things that she knew would await either of them if their husbands were to be chosen for them or if they showed weakness in the commons.

"I could see that," Blaise considered, pinching his chin in thought and getting a dirty look from the raging girl. "If it were anyone other than Potter, anyway."

"Elucidate," Daphne ordered, narrowed eyes watching her closest friend very, very carefully.

"Potter's not the type," he admitted with a shrug. "Weasley? Yes, I could see him taking anything he thought he could get away with. Thomas, Finnegan ... well, most of them, really. But, Potter, Longbottom, the Weasley twins and a few others, no. They're ... good guys. Simply put, Potter's too honorable to do something like that. If he weren't, then he would accept the many offers that have gone his way. He's too noble to take something when he knows he shouldn't and I don't see him entertaining such liberties with someone at Astoria's age."

"What offers?" Daphne said with a snort. "He's a scrawny, shy, bumbling oaf-"

"Even when that was true," Blaise interrupted, "he was still the 'Boy-Who-Lived'. His fame and the public knowledge of his wealth provided more than enough incentive. And don't think that I don't know the beaten puppy look didn't work on many girls," Blaise chided with a look that said he wasn't blind. "I believe you, yourself, had-"

"One more word, and you're going to be confessing your love to Malfoy," Daphne threatened, spinning her wand expertly in her fingers. "But, I suppose you're right. He isn't like Malfoy or his cronies. And the way he seems interested in Granger or even Lovegood, of all people, makes me think he's already got plans in that regard. I suppose you're right. Just continue on business as normal and maybe have a little talk with Astoria before she does anything."

"Speaking of Malfoy," Blaise began with a smug smirk. "What do you think of the effects of Potter's little stunt in the Great Hall?"

Daphne grinned beautifully, practically lighting up the room. "I honestly couldn't believe it when I saw it," she admitted. "I don't think I really believed him when he said he didn't hate all Slytherins, but I'd come to believe it. After seeing what he did in the Hall, I'm rather glad he isn't out to get us. He would be an incredibly powerful ally or our most dangerous enemy."

"I agree," Blaise said. "The fact that he pointed out that Malfoy has never been anything but hot air has had him nearly ostracized and almost totally isolated from everyone else save Crabbe and Goyle."

"I wish there was more information about his parents," Daphne admitted after a moment. "He'd probably be put in his place rather than mostly ignored now if we could find his father wasn't on the move and working at something. Everyone is too worried that Malfoy Senior is up to something and doesn't want to risk his ire." She allowed herself to fall onto her bed as she pondered on the nature of the current power struggle in Slytherin and how best to take advantage of it.

"You don't think he is?" Blaise asked carefully, looking highly intrigued. They didn't tend to talk about the activities of others' families since it was always a risky proposition, but he would admit that there was a high level of curiosity involved in this particular instance, even if the danger was, in effect, higher.

"No," Daphne stated. "Lucius Malfoy has always been one of those people who makes a plan where someone else would take the fall if things went bad while he tried to manipulate from the shadows. The idea that he was the one to go in and kill Umbridge, while I believe him capable, seems off somehow. At least without burning down the

house, too. Father said Lucius Malfoy was definitely a Death Eater, but was political rather than muscle and they would never do things on their own. This just seems ... inelegant, I suppose."

Blaise nodded. "It is also highly suspect that there are things pointing towards him as the culprit, as well. A floo call and then his sudden disappearance."

"But if it is the elder Malfoy suddenly taking action, there could be something very problematic on the horizon. Something that required him to lose his good-guy status or innocent act and be seen as the bastard he is. This just seems too big for eliminating a loose end." Daphne mused aloud.

"No one else has acted differently or made comment of any other serious movements, so either all children are out of the loop-"

"Smart, considering the children," Daphne interjected with an eyeroll.

"-Or they aren't, suggesting a lone act," Blaise finished, ignoring the interruption.

"Which is even more troublesome since it doesn't fit the elder Malfoy at all."

"So then, all evidence, conjecture and theories at best, suggest?" Blaise pushed, wondering if she came to the same conclusion he did.

"That Malfoy has been set up and is taking the fall, for once."

"Or already has, most likely," Blaise agreed with a nod.

"And Draco is out there in the commons, telling people his father is up to something big and how he's a lead role in it, probably due to Potter's actions so he seems more important-"

"-And just as likely going to get a blade slipped between his ribs while he sleeps," Blaise finished. There was always the chance of a dislocation spell to pop each of the spinal vertebrae apart from one another, as it was much cleaner, silent and quick, but left a trace. Still, Blaise had decided long ago that it was likely to be his spell of choice with an unregistered wand, of course.



"Think we should anonymously circulate that his parents left him?" Daphne asked with a hopeful look in her suddenly large, strikingly vulnerable eyes that almost made Blaise succumb for some heretofore unfathomable reason. It was like some emotional or mental pulling that seemed to say 'give me what I want'. That look scared him.

"If I'm right and his parents did end up as fall guys, then it won't matter," Blaise said, swallowing thickly as he fought valiantly against the power those eyes held over him. 'How did her eyes get so large and wet all of a sudden!'

"Oh yea," Daphne grumbled. "Good point. How long before that stuff usually gets sent out? I never liked reading up on funeral traditions." Unsaid was he had been to his mother's last three suiters' Last Testaments due to those 'inexplicable demises' all of them seemed to fall prey to, giving him a unique familiarity with the practices.

"If they followed tradition, seven days from the time they died. If not," Blaise shrugged. "Whenever it's discovered that they are dead."

"Draco Malfoy with his father's political power and money," Daphne sighed. "Somehow, I don't see him being half as intelligent as Potter about it."

"He has been trained since he was young to handle such things," Blaise rebutted. "Potter came into this world a couple of years ago totally ignorant of our culture and laws."

"Yes, but Draco's also been trained on how to comport himself and that was an obvious failure."

"Touché."

xXxXxXx

"Master?" Snarf asked, waddling over to Harry who was coming back from his workout that Friday morning.

"Hello Snarf," Harry said with a smile, picking up the little guy and grinning as he held onto Harry's ear to remain steady on his shoulder where he now sat. Of all the Thundercats, Snarf was the number one cuddliest in the pack. "What's up?"

"I know I was supposed to stay with the whiskered one until later, but he had a conversation with Snape last night about using potions on you, Miss Moon, Miss Hermione and a couple of others."

Harry growled and his eyes flashed for a moment. "Tell me what was said," Harry demanded, waiting at the middle of the hall where he could see if anyone came from either direction. One end was a dead end, in theory, but that was never truly the case in a castle where doors changed places.

[Flashback: Previous Night]

"Ah, Severus! Thank you for coming. Lemon drop?" Albus asked, offering the delicious treats to his friend.

"No. Thank you," Snape hissed gently, recoiling from the tainted candies. They were Albus' favorite and were made so by the potions Snape had laced them with since the older man couldn't get that same zing from the ones he found. While it kept Albus his toy, it also meant anyone who took him up on his offer would come back for more and become Snape's minion as well. A great passive method to get people under his thumb, but horrible since the old man was compelled to offer them to everyone who came into his office unless he disliked them enough or was in a state of mind to override the, admittedly, weak compulsion.

"Very well," Albus said, popping one of the delightful treats into his mouth and then beaming at the man across from him before putting all the portraits into a stasis where they would hear and see nothing of the following conversation. "I have called you here for a favor, my friend."

"A favor?" Severus asked simply, intrigued.

"Yes. I have need of a compound potion. A mixture of love, lust, fertility, loyalty and stamina," Albus said, sighing heavily and looking absolutely pathetic. Snape would have enjoyed the sight if he weren't thinking of the ridiculous concoction.

"Albus, compound potions can very rarely go as high as three within a single one," he stated simply, thinking of the best way to work this to his advantage. "Who are the targets?"

"Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Luna Lovegood, Lavender Brown and Ginny Weasley. Harry requires an heir, but with the way he is acting this year, I am worried he will not last much longer. Each of these girls must come to him and offer themselves to him so that his legacy will continue. But, I believe Harry will not last much longer in this world on his own and he refuses help. I had considered Miss Bones as well, but fear her aunt's critical eye for detail and likely drive to determine her niece's abnormal behavior could negatively affect my plans."

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched, the only sign that he was ecstatic about the situation. 'If the brat has this in his system when my potion is complete, they will force him to eliminate each girl long before the sluts are even showing. Yes ... I think this can work. And if I use some of the milder potions for everything but the love and loyalty, they shouldn't interfere with my own.'

"Headmaster," Snape began. "I will, of course, do my best to provide potions to you as I always do," he mentally smiled at his own joke. "But as I said, compound potions are tricky things. While I believe I could brew something up, I could never be sure of any side-effects. There is no telling what that could do to him and you would have to suffer the standard ramifications with messing with a person so heavy-handed a manner. Two effects in one potion is difficult enough if the results don't mix well, such as love and lust, but adding in the others could be problematic."

'Thank you, you simpering fool! You even provide me a patsy! I believe I shall actually get you a true present this Christmas, old man. An early death, away from all this pain and suffering you are soon to feel. After I see about becoming your sole beneficiary, of course.' Snape's heart beat faster and he felt a glimmer of happiness that his dark soul hadn't felt since the summer had ended and he was forced to leave his toys at home to die.

"I am aware, Severus. But as long as these girls are filled with his progeny, then it will be worth it in the end. Whatever happens, Harry's destiny must be met. And if not by himself, then by those of his own creation ... By his own hand," Dumbledore said, his gaze appearing to go to some point in time Snape couldn't readily identify before he shook his head. "We also cannot allow his wealth to fall

into the wrong hands, nor can all his political power follow it. We must do this for the 'Greater Good'."

Snape watched Dumbledore in silence for the next twenty seconds, counting off in his head to ensure it appeared he was thinking before he nodded once curtly and strode to the door where he paused. "I will brew your potion. But I leave the consequences of such a potion at your feet," he said as he left the room.

[End Flashback]

Harry's rage would have seen a portion of the castle destroyed if he hadn't smacked his hands to the castle and simply channeled everything he had into the wall. The cold, gray stone began to turn white as what looked like a magical frost stretched out from Harry's hands and grew larger until the wall and hallway appeared frozen.

Harry panted as the castle hummed to his senses in a way it never had before. He ignored the curious feeling he had that guided him into that action, as well as the appearance of the hall, and simply looked at the wide-eyed Snarf still on his shoulder. He let took a deep breath and then held for a moment before releasing. "Sorry, Snarf. But I can't let that happen."

The fur-person nodded his head so rapidly that even Dobby would have been impressed. While his master didn't see what he had done, Snarf could tell in some primal part of his mind that what he saw covering the walls was crystallized magic. It would be absorbed by the castle at some point when she noticed it, but for now, it was there and wouldn't go away.

Snarf swallowed as he watched his master breathe heavily, almost panting. It was certainly more in rage than exertion, he could tell. "Master? What will you do?"

"I don't know," Harry said after a moment, beginning to walk to his common room again.

Snarf didn't know what to do to help his master. He was really only a few months old. And his knowledge about feelings wasn't a whole lot better than his master's, either. But, he had learned a little. He sat on Harry's shoulder and hugged his arms around Harry's neck,

purring as he tried to ease his master's rage before it turned to actual happiness as he got scratched behind the ears.

"Thanks Snarf," Harry said quietly as the portrait hole opened for him.

"It's why I'm here, Master," he said, raising his chin so the questing finger could find its way under. After a moment, he hopped down and then disappeared, back to his watch station.

Harry sighed and then looked up, only to find Hermione and Luna there waiting on him. "Er, g'morning girls."

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione said, patting the couch next to her. It was, not coincidentally, between her and Luna, the latter of which had her bottom lip pushed out and her eyes appeared larger than normal. He didn't know why, but Harry felt guilty just for looking at them.

As soon as Harry sat, Luna was cuddled into his side, holding his arm almost like her life depended on it. Harry remembered her acting like this in his future memories, but that had only been after a horrible prank. 'Is that what happened? Hermione's going to tell me someone pranked Luna? I'm not in the mood for this crap. I'll just scare the hell out of them and be done with it. She shouldn't be hurt.' Regardless of what he thought, Harry leaned back and pulled both girls into hugs, sensing that neither was very happy. "What's wrong? You both seem upset."

"You've been ignoring us," Luna mumbled into his shoulder, keeping her face pushed into his body. He could tell she wasn't crying, but felt it was probably because she didn't want to be.

"What?" He asked, confused. "No I haven't, I-"

"You have, Harry," Hermione said with a sigh, taking comfort in his hug and curling up as close to a ball as she could into him. "Ever since that night in the Room, you've spent less and less time with us and more time alone. Sometimes, you're just gone and we don't even realize when you left."

Harry sighed deeply, letting the air in his lungs out slowly as he tilted his head back. He squeezed both girls tightly, getting responsive

hugs back. He mentally looked back on the past week and realized they were right. He had been wanting some time alone to try to come to a decision on how to help Luna, but he had no real idea. It also didn't help that all the alone time he could get was either doing something meant to be left to adults, exercising or practicing his dueling against his evil twin in the Room and other random targets. He hadn't wanted to think much since he'd killed and since he'd found out about what fate awaited Luna. 'There has to be something I can do! There is no way fate controls our destinies that thoroughly! Otherwise, what's the point of free will and choosing for ourselves?'

"I'm sorry," he finally said after a few minutes in which the girls had given him to think, which he was grateful for. "You're right, and I'm sorry. It's just ... I can't begin to describe how important my decision is on something, something literally life or death, and I don't know what to do. I only just realized how important the answer truly was, too," he confessed, thinking of his revelation that he truly did care for Luna as more than a simple friend. Even if he didn't, it would be difficult, but now he understood that he had to willingly give up something that, in truth, he didn't want to. He didn't want to lose either girl for any reason or in any sense of the words. That was why he hadn't pushed his pursuit of Hermione since the summer, even though he hadn't understood that at the time. A part of him was being greedy and wouldn't let go. Couldn't let go.

"Then let us help you, Harry," Hermione pled, looking at her best friend. He looked down at her and she wanted to cry at how much pain she saw in his eyes right then. How much suffering. But she didn't know why he was suffering, and that hurt even more. "Why are you shutting us out when we've already admitted that opening up makes things easier?"

"Do you hate us?" Luna asked quietly, sounding vulnerable and already assured of the answer.

"No," Harry whispered, feeling absolutely wretched. He couldn't stop himself as he kissed both girls on their foreheads, first to Luna who was blinking at him almost in tears and then Hermione, who was sure Harry was distancing himself to his own detriment. "No. I do not, have never, and could never hate you," he said fiercely but quietly, trying to stress his honesty while doing his best not to scare either girl by making his denials louder.

"Then why?" Luna asked, wrapping her arms around his upper torso and Hermione's, grabbing both in a hug with Harry stuck in the middle. "Why do you keep leaving us?"

Harry was quiet for a few moments, doing his best to organize his thoughts and feelings in a way he could speak and be understood. "You are both ... important to me," he said at last, his eyes closed and his voice quiet. He spoke as though telling some horrible secret, letting out his most vulnerable side for them to either protect or destroy. "I know it seems a little odd, but I need you both in my life. I can already feel it. I can't survive without both of you. I can't do what I need to do; going forward and facing my future without you both there. But as much as I can't hurt either of you, I worry that I would."

The girls hugged harder, both feeling identical. "You're our best friend, Harry," Hermione said, laying the side of her head on Harry's shoulder as Luna did the same. "We will always help you with anything we can."

"Even if I've only really known you for about three months, you're both the most important parts of my life here," Luna agreed. "I understand what the future may hold. I've heard of what happened in your first year. I know what happened last year. And I'm fully aware of what's going on this year. I understand he will come back eventually. And I would rather stay by your side, even if it means getting hurt." Luna looked up and let her fingers trail along Harry's jawline as she smiled. "You told me ... in the broom closet that friends are always there for each other when they need them. We're friends and that will never cease to be true. And you will always need us, so we will always be there."

Hermione frowned mentally at the idea of both being in the broom closet until she remembered what Luna was referring to. At least now she was sure she wasn't becoming so blind to Harry that both could elope to a broom closet and she'd miss it. "She's right, you know," Hermione stated, looking up at Harry and smirking. "You're stuck with us, whether you like it or not, Potter."

Harry smirked back. "I wouldn't have it any other way," he said, looking into Hermione's eyes in a way that felt like he was falling, but wasn't Legilimency. It was broken as he realized it, however, and he shook his head, turning to Luna and missing Hermione's gulp and rapid blinking as she had felt the same thing. For a brief moment,

Hermione could have sworn she felt ... Well, if it had lasted a second longer, she was pretty sure Luna would have needed to hit them with a water or freezing charm.

"Now," he began, hoping to change the subject at least a little until he could decide how to continue it in a safer venue. "You mentioned a few days ago you wanted to practice Legilimency again. Have you both rested up well last night?"

"Yes," both girls replied together.

"Alright. How do you want to do this?" He asked.

"I think you should both enter my mind first," Hermione offered immediately. A part of her was scared at the idea of the two of them in her head at once, since the last time Harry all but had free reign and movement inside of her, but she had used her time-turner to get extra sleep for the last week so any time she was up, she would be awake enough if Harry came to discuss his problems, so she had been getting ten hours. Of course, she was also hoping Harry would view one of her other memories or fantasies so he would, hopefully, reciprocate. Not that she was planning for it to happen, of course, but if it did, then who was she to deny fair play if he offered?

"Are you sure?" Luna asked. "It's much different to defend against two probes instead of one. You have to learn to defend against both methods of probing at once or one of them will have an easier time of it."

"It'll still give me a better idea than just one of you," Hermione stated. "And I took a page from Harry's book, so there are a lot of automated defenses as well and I got some ideas from you, too. I've changed it a lot since he was last in my head. Just promise that anything we find in each others' heads, we don't hold against anyone?"

"Of course not," Luna chirped. "That's just silly. There's really only one thing that I could find that would ruin my friendship with either of you, and that's only if I found it was all some elaborate joke, but neither of you are anything like that. You're really good friends, so you'd never hurt me like that."



Harry felt like crying while also feeling like a heel, a bastard and anything else he could think of. If he had to stop being friends with her, then that is exactly how she would feel, that he had been tricking her the entire time and it would literally crush her spirit.

"We'll always be your friends, Luna," Hermione said with a smile. "We won't ever hurt you just like you'd never hurt us." Hermione grunted lightly as Luna bear-hugged the two of them, her chest mashed up against Harry as the surprisingly petite blonde reached from across him to wrap them both up hard enough to pop their joints. It was frighteningly comfortable except for the fact that Harry hadn't showered yet.

"Ready?" Harry asked, trying to throw his discomfort at their talks aside to focus.

Hermione pulled back and moved the table in front of the couch to manhandle a chair there instead before flopping down and wriggling to get comfortable. "Do me," she said, looking positively defiant.

Two wands came up and pointed to Hermione's focused eyes. "Legilimens," the two incanted.

"Eep! Eep, eep, eep!" Luna began hopping from one foot to the other as she appeared in Hermione's mindscape in her normal day clothes and barefoot as she had been in the common room. She rubbed at her arms furiously and held her eyes tightly shut, trying to keep them from stinging with the high winds blowing ice around and into her eyes.

Harry appeared right next to her, only handling the weather a little better since he suspected it would be there. He immediately grabbed Luna and picked her up bridal style, taking off towards the gleaming, monolithic building that shone brightly against the white and gray backdrop.

Five feet of running, Harry slid to a halt as his eyes widened and his jaw dropped in both awe and horror. Rising from the ground were acromantula, skeletons with axes and swords and large, blocky golems made of what looked like ice numbering several dozen to halt him from going any further. 'That really shouldn't surprise me, but damn!' Harry thought, watching the glistening bodies start

moving forward and fully ignoring the cold that was slowly sapping his strength away and distracting him.

Harry growled as Luna whimpered, her eyes ignoring the flying snow to stare wide-eyed around her. He tossed the shocked blonde girl over his left shoulder and raised his right that now had full range of movement. He took a stance so his right side was facing the oncoming horde and Luna was furthest away from his coming attack, but didn't consider it'd allow the girl to turn enough to look and squeak in shock, grabbing Harry's shirt in fear.

A gout of flame erupted from a foot in front of Harry's hand, shooting forward like a flamethrower. The high winds of the environment and the extreme cold actually weakened the flame to less than half its usual effect, but Harry pumped more power into it and held it for ten seconds before stopping, only to twitch as he realized that either the ice wasn't going to melt, or it wasn't ice they were made of since they had now covered half the distance to him.

"Harry...", Luna mumbled, unsure of how to defend against this kind of onslaught. She could defend against the usual form of occlumency, which was more of a duel against the mind of the defender, but this was ridiculous. She now understood what Hermione meant by mindscape.

"It'll be fine, Luna," Harry said, patting the girl to try and comfort her. Sadly, the only available spot was her bottom, causing her to blush fiercely even under the current circumstance. Thankfully, he didn't notice, or he probably wouldn't have reacted in time to stop them from being caught.

Harry put his hand back in the same position from seconds before and pulled back slowly, concentrating heavily. His movements were becoming slower and hard to control as the biting winds attacked him. He was now barely able to feel anything on the outside of his body and he was shivering just as violently as Luna.

As he pulled his hand back, the wind seemed to settle and the snow in the air rushed to his open palm, coalescing into a ball that couldn't be larger than a grape before it all suddenly stopped and there was an unnatural stillness in the air.

The advancing horde was three feet away when Harry threw his arm forward and a concussive blast of magic radiated outwards, shattering the creatures to shards that were carried away in the wind. 'Thank you Snape,' Harry thought, not taking time to watch what happened and instead run forward as quickly as his near-frozen body would allow, deciding to blast his way into the building again. He idly took note that the door was widely visible and appeared to be some sort of riddle or puzzle written in runes.

"Hell," Harry bitched, seeing the building was now made of some sort of gleaming metal. Rather than decide it was impossible, he threw everything he had at it and managed to scratch the wall. Looking aghast, he tried again, throwing as much power as he could to it and caused another scratch, only to slump as he saw the wall seem to actually heal the damage as he watched.

"B-b-b-oth of us-s-s," Luna chattered, glad Harry was keeping her feet from the snowy ground. She still couldn't feel them, but at least she wasn't feeling that sensation that felt like slicing when walking in snow for too long and he had shoes on. "Three, two, one," she counted, both sending out as strong of an attack as possible, only to see the building adapt right before they hit, turning into some sort of reflective surface that was made of thousands upon thousands of tetrahedral disks that deflected the assaults over a wider area and back outwards. Thankfully, it didn't hit the two trying to gain entry, but the shapes began to grow and cover the rest of the building.

The wind died down suddenly and the door a few dozen feet away opened as Hermione's voice seemed to project from everywhere and nowhere at once. "You're both about to catch your death out there. You couldn't break through the wall, so we can assume that's good. Come inside to test my other defenses, or do you think it's good enough?"

Harry really didn't want to admit defeat, but he also didn't want to stay stuck out there freezing to death. His hesitation, however, seemed to amuse Hermione.

"I've got hot chocolate in there for you..." she said in a sing-song voice, causing Luna to smack Harry's bottom in retaliation for earlier.

"M-m-mush!" The blonde girl demanded.

Harry entered the monolith warily, placing Luna down next to a stand of hot chocolate that was quite out of place. There were three seats, cups and a large jug of thick, chocolaty goodness that Hermione was already sipping from her cup.

"G-gimme," Luna demanded, taking her only half-full cup and chugging it, thankful it wasn't filled more or she'd have spilled it with her shuddering.

"I decided to give you a brief respite," Hermione's mental avatar mentioned, looking curiously at both of her friends as she did so. "I want to make sure that you're as fresh as possible so I can test them under the best possible defenses."

"Makes sense," Harry said, channeling his magic into small pillars of flame to rest between each chair and back a touch to warm them while they drank.

"So this is a mindscape?" Luna asked, putting her cup down and licking her lips, missing her new mustache as she glanced about. "I had always heard they are ridiculously difficult to maintain because of how complex they are. This is actually the first time I've come across one, and I've practiced Occlumency with many of Daddy's friends to test my defenses as I grew up."

"Long story short," Hermione began, "is that we assign a small portion of our subconscious to keep an eye on it. I got the idea from Harry who did it without even realizing it. It means that a part of us is always monitoring the mindscape and controlling it, making sure to keep those who break in playing by our rules. It also means we've got at least some sort of defense while unconscious, too."

"Wait," Harry mumbled, feeling more like his old self. "You mean the Hermione in my head is my own subconscious?"

Hermione smirked at him. "You didn't honestly think you could have a part of me in your head when we're separate beings, did you?"

Harry's blush seemed to say otherwise. "Are we talking to Hermione or her subconscious?" Harry asked.

"Hermione," she confirmed. "I'm the real me. Mine will work differently than yours because of how I set it up. I'm actually not

actively doing anything except to let you in here because I want to see how my automated defenses will fare now that I've set them up after seeing yours."

"Nice touch with the things outside," Luna said, holding her tummy where she just may have had too much chocolate to try and warm up. 'How can you drink too much of something that doesn't really exist?' She wondered, hiccuping once.

"I realized it was foolish of me to think only the cold and wind would stop someone," Hermione admitted. "If they have to face off against those, then they can't fare much better against the weather since they have to divert their attention. I made them out of what was meant to be diamond, so people would think they were ice and waste fire attacks, but it seems you figured out how to get around that," Hermione grumbled. "I'll fix that later."

"Are you ready?" Luna asked, looking at Harry and getting a nod. "Thank you for the yummy hot chocolate, Hermione. With your permission, we'll do our best to invade your mind and find your deepest and darkest secrets and desires now."

Hermione's face couldn't seem to decide on whether it wanted to pale or blush, but it kept going through the motions as if trying to. "Er, yea... Okay, I guess."

Harry chuckled. He always found a flustered Hermione cute, even in his past life when he didn't think of her romantically. He looked around quickly, noting the air was still very cold, but the stone beneath their feet was extremely warm, which he suspected was warmer than he thought since Luna seemed adverse to keeping her feet on the ground for longer than a few seconds, so there was still a very thick, cloud-like fog roiling along the ground, always moving as though there were creepy-crawlies moving about. "Luna, try to make shoes, please," he asked, thinking it may help her as they moved along.

Luna looked at Harry curiously before looking at her feet and concentrating. It was curious to watch her expressions since her face was at first serene, even with a chocolate mustache, then she was narrowing her eyes. Then she glared. Then she shoved her bottom lip out and pouted, jerking in surprise when bright yellow

sneakers appeared on her feet, causing her to look up with a blinding grin. "Begging works!"

"Actually, I made them for you," Hermione said looking sheepish. She couldn't help it... Luna gave off an aura of sadness when she pouted that Hermione couldn't help but to try and help her. She hated seeing Luna sad. She pulled off that beaten puppy look far too well, probably because every time she did it, she was sincere.

"Oh," Luna said, admiring her new shoes, appreciating the brightness. "Thank you, then. Perhaps I should try this method. I couldn't figure out how to make them in your mind. In my own, it's much easier."

"Part of my defense, though I don't know if it was necessary," Hermione said as she stood. "I didn't want anyone to think up some sort of tool or weapon to use. You can't even show up here with a wand. I know people show up here looking like mental representations of themselves and their abilities, but I made their access to magic look different so it was something I understood and not them, hoping it would keep them from using their magic as easily. It's just my luck you appear to not need wands here."

"Of course not, Silly," Luna said with a small laugh and hugging to take any bite out of her words. "This is all mental. Most people will understand that. But, it may help keep them from being their full potential while here. So it isn't a bad idea, just not a cure all."

"Well, something to look at later," Hermione said with a shrug. "For now, you guys haven't managed to get any further than past the first defense on your own and they'd have grown into larger numbers from each individual piece they broke in to, so at the moment, I believe I'm winning even against two probes," she finished with a hop to her step and a cheeky grin.

Naturally, Harry wouldn't allow that to go unchallenged. "Hermione, for the sake of testing this, I'm going to try to find a certain type of memory and do everything I can to view it. If I can't, then you win. That way, we can really test your defenses, okay? I'll let you do the exact same thing with any sort of memory you want in mine, too."

"What type of memory?" Hermione asked carefully.

"Whatever you try the hardest to hide from me," he said, ignoring her pale badly enough to match the white fog along the ground. This was really necessary since anyone who tried to break into her mind would very possibly try to do the exact same.

"I'll be attempting to find those conversations you mentioned you had with your mother," Luna said, thinking an adult woman's perspective on what they discussed with Harry at the breakfast table a while ago, and a mother's at that, would help her understand more, including where Hermione was coming from during that conversation about life partners. "It would probably be best that we split up, Harry. Is there anything that can really hurt us, Hermione?" Luna asked, looking longingly at the remaining warm drink.

"E-Er, no," Hermione said, swallowing heavily. "You won't get hurt, at least not permanently. Like in Harry's mind, the things that I designed to try and severely hurt anyone breaking into my mind won't go after you. But, there will be some that are meant to forcibly expel your minds from mine and they will hurt a bit, I think. At least, I designed them to give a massive migraine when doing it or making that person relive my memory of what Cho's spell did to try and make them retreat, so I hope they work."

"Keep them active," Harry said. "Not ones that'll do lasting harm, but anything that'll just cause pain. At least in regards to me. I'd rather be sure they work than find out when you need them that they don't."

"Likewise," Luna agreed. "You felt that pain to protect me, so at the very least, I'll have a better understanding if I experience it and Harry's right. You need to know your defenses will work and there is really no other way to be sure."

Hermione didn't like it, but she had come to the same conclusion, so she reactivated those particular defenses. "Agreed. But if you have or develop something similar, then you can't go easy on me, either. Agreed?" Getting two affirmatives, she faded away and their comfortable seats followed.

"Are you sure you want to split up?" Harry asked Luna. "If one of us is in trouble, the other would be there to help out."

"Scared, Harry?" Luna teased, looking at him with a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Little bit, yea," he confirmed, gesturing around them. "She's devious, you know."

Luna chuckled. "See you on the other side, Silly." And with that, she walked on, only to immediately have to deal with a ghostly form that ran into her and tried to push her backwards and towards the exit where they came in. The blonde growled and slashed her arm, sending the glowing green spook into the wall hard where it was destroyed with a splat of glowing ectoplasm that dripped down. "Yuck! It slimed me!"

Harry chuckled back. "Good luck Luna." He went the other way, only to suddenly worry as he felt the ground give a few inches where he stood, which caused the fog to rush away from his foot enough to show the ground had turned into one and a half foot large squares, which his foot had just pressed one of down, activating a trap. "Oh crap," he muttered as he jumped backwards, dodging red beams of light that shot out of the walls that looked like either lasers or concentrated stunning spells.

Harry fell to his butt on the floor, his arms behind him and holding him up as he watched a series of those red beams start firing throughout the entire hallway in a random sequence, forcing him to follow Luna's path until the next split. "Bloody hell..."

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Luna took one step forward, held, and then slowly eased her weight onto the floor, hoping to learn from Harry's mistake after she had learned what happened to him. Not the red beams of light, of course. She hadn't seen that. But the second trap he triggered that dropped the floor out from under them to a very deep, black pit that had some sort of beastly snarls coming from deep below. The two had barely managed to run forward fast enough to outrun the falling floor, only to hear Hermione making a note to make the entire floor cave in at once rather than to give that moment to act as she thought a real falling floor would likely respond to such a trap.



Harry hadn't said very nice things at that point. They had split up at the next fork in the halls and spent the next dozen or so minutes roaming about. Then Luna had come across her first memory, clapping and hopping in place and rushing to it. Then she learned Hermione had protected the memory with a troll statue that turned into a real troll and it was apparently just as magically resistant. Luna had run, thankful it wouldn't chase her far from the memory globe. Once she found the next, it was apparently guarded by the same thing. But, Luna had run around it, since it was apparently only as smart as their real counterparts, and just as slow. She had grabbed the orb, thus dispelling the troll into a stone-like state again and witnessed the memory, pouting when she found it was merely a standard memory of her reading at the fireplace in the common room.

When she had found the third memory, Luna learned it was guarded by hippogriff. As it turns out, they were either just like their real counterparts as well, since bowing had allowed her to approach, or it was because she was allowed. Whichever the case, Luna had been allowed to approach the glowing globe and found it was a memory from the summer before where her and Harry had been alone at his house and she came across him exercising.

It wasn't much longer before Luna realized the more important the memory to Hermione, the stronger the beast that guarded it. And then she had found herself at the first memory she had viewed and stood confused, wondering how she had gotten turned around. She had been paying very close attention to her movements. So, she determined one of two possibilities; either Hermione's mazes changed shape and form, or there was some kind of puzzle to moving around.

'How do I break the puzzle?' Luna wondered to herself.

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"They've all been blue again," Harry mumbled as he passed yet another memory globe. He had, in the past hour or so, discovered a curiosity amongst the memory spheres as he viewed more of them. Basically, he could feel the sort of emotion attached to them if he focused his attention on them. He had tested his theory with the last eight he had come across, save the last-most two, including this one. Basically, if it was a bland, empty feeling, then it was an every day

memory that held no real significance to Hermione. Things like studying in the library, sitting in History of Magic and keeping her time alone in the common room all felt relatively empty, but generally content. His bushy-haired friend truly did enjoy learning for the sake of learning and she felt accomplishment with each new nugget of knowledge she squirreled away in her head.

Others he had come across thus far, ones that had him teasing with her or joking around, had a more contented happiness and a sensation of belonging with them. The same held true for some she had regarding Luna as well, though mostly to a lesser degree, which he actually kind of felt ... accomplishment towards. She enjoyed her time with him. That had been what he had wanted since coming back and deciding he could really enjoy life with Hermione by his side. He also couldn't expect she would feel as strongly about Luna simply because, as they'd mentioned, they only knew each other for about three months. They had come so close due to the large number of slumber parties they had, at least in the words of Luna.

'But where would you hide from me if you didn't want me to find a certain memory,' Harry mused to himself, deciding on a different tactic. He closed his eyes and simply imagined himself as everywhere as he could possibly envision. He tried his hardest to imagine himself currently without form and not held by the restrictions of this world, doing his best to fight it as he would command his own world to bypass his own rules.

He could feel resistance to his attempts, something trying to hold him in this form, but it wasn't the world itself. It wasn't Hermione's doing. Whatever it was, it was his own attempts at changing that was causing it. Frowning, he pushed harder. He was not a human boy. He was not held to this building on his feet or by the apparent physical structure. He was a mind; constantly changing, adapting and only as weak as he was willing to allow himself to be. The very nature of Harry and Hermione began to compete, trying to determine exactly how they were competing for dominance.

'If you are your mind, then I am my mind,' Harry heard a voice that was more than speech, telling him he was not changing what he was fighting against. He was trying to change his nature, what he was, within a mind built of law and order. The two subconscious minds battled beyond conscious understanding in instinct and a primordial base of nature and reality, trying to determine the rules of

which they worked and how they could function and commune with one another.

'You are your mind, and I am mine. But I am all-encompassing. I change. I adapt,' he said, knowing he was more flexible and open. He was not as rigid as Hermione's nature.

'As do I,' came the voice, sounding sure and firm, unyielding. 'I am stronger. You cannot break me.' The voice sounded more like the Hermione Harry knew and defiant, not willing to submit.

'I do not wish to break you,' Harry voiced. 'But I am not you, nor do I follow your rules. I can accept with belief and faith while you require empirical evidence to accept. Something that cannot be argued and proven.'

'But you cannot be that which you are not,' the voice stated, sounding less sure, more frantic as it realized Harry was changing and the representation of who and what he was was becoming different. He was no longer boy or man. He was ... more.

'And yet, you know I am changing, that I am adapting.'

The voice was silent as Harry finally succeeded in no longer being confined to his mental avatar. He was aware of that which was around him. He was aware of Hermione's stray thoughts, which seemed focused on his avatar and not realizing what he had just gone through any more than he did. He could feel Hermione's memory spheres and the nature of what they were. He could feel the nature of Hermione's monolithic building and even sensed Luna, somehow twelve floors below him even though he couldn't remember going up or down, nor could he sense any sort of connection between the floors themselves.

It was actually almost mind boggling just how massive the whole place was and being consciously aware of it all at once as he was sure Hermione was. He could feel her attention everywhere at once with no problems in tracking them or watching what they were doing. The power of her mind was so great she didn't even feel a strain to do so while Harry was nearly overwhelmed, only remaining able to handle the overload by not focusing on everything at once and instead, trying to keep himself in a relative bubble of about an eighth of the total mindscape.

'I don't think you'll ever cease to amaze me, Hermione,' Harry thought lovingly, smiling to himself, which widened when he heard Hermione wondering just what he was grinning like a loon for.

Harry decided to focus, looking for memories Hermione was focusing the most on and that had the strongest emotions attached. Slowly, so as not to lose himself, he scanned the various floors before he found glistening golden orbs one floor up from the lower-most floor deep underground. Wincing, he looked at the ground beneath him and then shrugged before simply falling downward.

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'What the hell! No!' Hermione screeched in her head, trying to figure out what Harry was doing to go through her inner barrier. He just punched straight through and kept going deeper and deeper. She tried to put pressure on him, but it didn't seem to deter him in the slightest. He hadn't stopped until he bottomed out, entering her core.

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'What is this?' Harry wondered, finding himself in an absolutely humongous room that had to be at least eight hundred yards across with huge arched doorways along the entire wall and spaced about five feet apart while each door was probably eight or ten feet across and probably closer to fifteen feet tall. Perhaps five hundred yards into the room, beyond the twenty-foot floor that ran along the length of the room, was nothing. Simply nothing. He could see some points of light that made it look like he was looking down to see the nighttime sky, but in the center of that void, there was something floating.

It was a large gazebo-like structure, fifty feet across with a very large, writhing mass of blue strands that vibrated and hummed. The energy coming from them felt like the very embodiment of what Hermione was and, if Harry wasn't mistaken, he would swear that was her magical core as much as it appeared to be thousands of memory strands.

Harry didn't understand what the words or symbols above the arched doorways meant, but he knew that where he was should have been the most protected place within Hermione's mindscape.

'Let's not mess with anything here,' he considered, putting his awareness out again and realizing he had gone too far down. He allowed himself to float upwards, hearing Hermione's worry and fear about where he was.

Instead, he went up to the glowing group of spheres on the next level which, as far as he could tell, had no entrance or exit.

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"How very strange, Mister Hippogriff," Luna said aloud from the creature's back as it flew her around above the maze. "It's like there is only the one floor anywhere in this black void, but we don't see Harry or Hermione anywhere, nor do we see any other floors that we know must be here. Why, as large as this floor is, there are no more than twenty memory spheres."

The hippogriff snorted its apparently agreement. The creature wasn't sure why it was flying this girl around, but she respected it and bowed, then asked rather than demanded to fly about for a look. The hippogriff really didn't have anything else to do but guard a memory sphere, but she had already seen it and there was no one else about, so there certainly wasn't any harm in it.

"Well, I haven't looked at that sphere," Luna said, pointing to a corner with another troll guarding the sphere. "Would you be kind enough to take me there so I can see what it has?"

Well, that wasn't the hippogriff's sphere, so it had no reason to stop her from looking at it as far as it was concerned. It dove down carefully in the way it had found the girl appreciated as she squealed in glee and hugged him, scratching in a place it somehow found to enjoy before landing.

Luna ignored the troll that shattered its stone shell and lumbered towards her too slow to stop her from touching the sphere, making it turn to stone again while she drifted as she began to relive this particular memory. The hippogriff, wondering what the big deal was, as it was created from the mind of an inquisitive girl, leaned forward and touched its beak to the globe, getting drawn in, too.

Luna looked around, taking only a moment to wave at the hippogriff as it appeared beside her and looked around curiously. Luna looked

and saw a much younger Hermione laying on a blanket on the floor with a cup of juice and a bowl of popcorn and stared at a box before pushing a button on a little device in her hands.

Luna's attention was drawn to the box as it began to show pictures and sounds like a pensieve, only through a window, and she saw it was some sort of ... something called 'Beauty and the Beast'.

The Ravenclaw was almost immediately drawn into the story as she sat on the couch with the very confused hippogriff laying on its belly next to it, deciding to watch what had this girl so fascinated.

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Harry came out of the first golden sphere with a fierce blush, his senses reaching out enough to hear Hermione chanting 'no, no, no' in her head. This had apparently been after the last time they had played in his pool during the summer and she had apparently been very excited when she returned to an empty home and knew she had plenty of time before her parents returned, so she didn't have to be quiet, or even in her bed. She had, instead, decided it'd be more interesting to stay on the kitchen table where Harry had shared lunch that day with her.

Hermione had realized that their method of protecting their memories was different than the usual. It protected better, but if someone got past those defenses, then touching the memory was like learning it all at once, but allowing you to watch and witness it. So, even though Harry had pulled out of the memory seconds after seeing what Hermione had begun to do, loudly and with gusto, on her kitchen table, he had immediately retreated, but still knew what had happened as if it were his own memory.

He had felt he would be safe! The first memory had been when he saved her from the troll in first year! It had felt ... wonderful, really. He felt great affection, happiness and the loss of misery from it. He had been drawn to it like a moth to flame.

The second memory, however, was ... heated. It felt like need, greater affection, joy, happiness, desire and even somehow felt like raw need. He hadn't realized how strongly Hermione felt that burning desire and need in that memory was so powerful as to

practically make him feel he actually felt like he needed to view the memory. Once he was close and sensed it, he couldn't not view it.

He blushed harder when he realized several of the spheres around him felt the same, though perhaps not quite as strong. He was pretty sure the only real reason she had reacted so strongly was because she had noticed his own discomfort when he got out of the pool after wrestling about in the water. He had honestly thought he had been discrete enough.

'Obviously not,' he thought, feeling Hermione's mortification and ... he wasn't really sure what it was, but she also seemed oddly pleased about something. 'Maybe Luna's having a rougher time of it than I am,' he thought.

Harry sighed, before trying to decide if he should view another one or not. After several seconds of trying to determine the feelings from them, he gave it up as a bad idea. Hermione would obviously be upset if he continued to get peeks at her while she was enjoying her alone time, even if she was yelling his name in that one.

In a way, he didn't feel bad for seeing it. She had seen several of his own fantasies which included the two of them. But, he did feel bad in another way, simply because she hadn't seen anything real as he had, twice now, of their real bodies. But, he wouldn't dare approach that. He'd let her do so if she wanted.

Sighing, Harry pushed his awareness out and then located Luna, who was next to a ... hippogriff? 'I swear, that girl can make friends with a cannibal.'

Harry allowed himself to go upwards and met with his blonde-haired friend who was gazing into the memory orb with a small grin, though he ignored the hippogriff that had half its head in it as well. He pulled her backwards and out of the memory, causing her to pout.

"Aw! Is it time to go back yet? There was only one petal left!" Luna grumped.

"Huh?" Harry asked.

"Never mind. Did you find anything worth watching?" Luna asked, walking away and making Harry follow, even though she had no idea where she could go.

"Er, yea, kinda," Harry said, blushing lightly and grinning a little as his memory replayed his newest memory even as he felt Hermione grumble.

"How did you leave this floor?" Luna asked. "The hippogriff gave me a ride up, but all I saw was one floor and no doors or stairs. Was there a hidden door?"

"Well, I sort of went through the floor and ceiling," he said, coming out of his memories.

Luna looked up, not really seeing a ceiling and not knowing Hermione purposefully changed that since Harry's last visit, and then down, stomping the floor with a brightly-colored foot. "Hm. How odd. Ready to go back?"

"Yea," Harry said, watching Luna fade away first and then left himself, one he was sure she was gone.

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When Harry blinked to let his dry eyes moisten, he saw Hermione looking down with a face as red as the couch he sat on, but he could just barely see the small grin. He knew, right then and there, that whatever he thought he understood about the girl was just plain wrong. But, he also knew that she had sufficiently developed her shields for what he needed. Tomorrow was the day he came clean, and hoped she didn't hate him.

"Oh honestly! She would never hate you!"

Harry jumped a moment, looking around. He recognized that voice from somewhere. He realized he was more ... aware of the things around him, just like he was in Hermione's mind. He could feel the three of them were the only ones in the common room other than Crookshanks, who was hiding stealthily in a nook and watching the entire common room, on the lookout for something. There were also eight upper years up, but the rest were still sleeping. 'How odd...'



"You did wonderful, Hermione!" Luna decreed gaily. "Do you think we may ever be able to meet one summer so I can watch that thing you watched?"

"Of course, Luna," Hermione said, smiling at the blonde girl. "We'll look into getting together this summer. How does that sound?"

"Brilliant," Luna said happily. "What did you think?" She asked, looking over to Harry.

"I'll be honest," he began. "I'm not sure what I did to ... do what I did," he mumbled in confusion. "But, I think I changed the way I think or something and it let me ignore the rules of her mindscape."

Hermione blinked guilelessly. "You changed the way you think?" She asked simply. She kind of wondered if that was why it was harder to see him when she saw him smiling before he went to see her naughtier memories. He had become a bit more opaque and practically see-through. She was just glad he hadn't accessed the other spheres since her actual fantasies would have probably given him the wrong idea.

"That's how it felt," Harry said. "Anyway, are you girls ready to rummage around in my head?"

"What do you want us to look for?" Luna asked.

"Whatever you want," Harry responded, smiling at them both. "I've added some non-lethal things to stop you in places where I normally wouldn't want anyone and, anywhere else, you have full access. So, you get to see anything you can get to.

"Anything, huh?" Hermione asked, almost as if hearing a challenge.

"If you can find it, yes," Harry said with a grin. "No holds barred."

"You do realize my alternate in there gave me a brief understanding of how your memories were stored, right?" She asked, raising a brown eyebrow and smirking evilly.

"Then let's hope you find the juicy ones before I evict you from my mind," Harry said, waggling his own eyebrows in acceptance of the

challenge he read from her body language, causing her blush to reappear, but her grin only widened.

"I think I'll try to find the memory of when you made the Thundercats," Luna said, placing her chin in her palm and taking a thinking pose. 'And if I can find out why you're upset during that, then maybe I can help.'

"I'm going for the juicy ones," Hermione said, while thinking, 'and the juicier, the better.' She twirled her wand, looking forward to the challenge.

"When you're ready, ladies," Harry said, leaning back and stowing his wand in the holster on his arm.

Wands raised. "Legilimens!"

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"Where did he go?" Luna asked as Harry seemed to disappear. "Harry James Potter! Get back here and let me discover your deepest, darkest secrets!"

Hermione laughed easily and shook her head. "We're in his mindscape, Luna. He made it look like Hogwarts, the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade and a little bit of other stuff I'm not sure of."

"Oh," Luna said, looking around with appreciation. "He's got an eye for detail."

"Well, a lot of things are built from his memories," Hermione explained, getting up with Luna and taking her to look out the window where it was a near-perfect replica of Hogwarts, save for a much larger and heavily fortified wall and a huge host of different species acting as guards. "Apparently, his subconscious makes the details and such for him and builds on and repairs while he's not in here."

"That's a wonderful set-up," Luna said, looking around again. "Is it as large as the school truly is?"

"Um, I don't know," Hermione acknowledged with a frown. "I've actually not been everywhere. I know the headmaster's office is his

control center, he stores his naughty dreams and fantasies about people in their dorm rooms, and I've been in the halls from the Astronomy Tower to the Headmaster's office and from there to here. That's actually it."

Luna looked at Hermione curiously. "So, the only place you've actually viewed memories is where there are naughty ones?"

Hermione blushed and tried to stammer out a denial until she realized, that was actually the case. "Er..."

"Do we want to stick together or split up?" Luna asked, giving Hermione a simple out. She didn't want to risk Hermione denying anything between her and Harry right now when it could affect how she actually deals with him.

"Er, stick together, I think," Hermione admitted. "I know the general layout of the memories, but haven't actually tried them yet because Harry didn't want to risk the defenses against me since he designed them to disable or kill and he didn't know what they would actually do."

"Very well, where would you like to look?"

Hermione pondered on that. She really did want to look at more of Harry's naughty orbs, but she didn't think Luna would be able to get up there and, even if she could, it would be kind of rude. She was kind of curious if he had any about Luna, though, too, but still. Kind of rude. "I've always been kind of curious about the memory from when he fought the basilisk," Hermione admitted after a few moments of thought.

"Lead on," Luna said, looking around still and having no idea where things would be, chose to let Hermione lead. As she followed her, however, she found something extremely curious in the halls. "Hermione, do you see four of me and an extra you walking towards us?"

"Heh, yes. Harry has groups of people he trusts walking around as patrols. There are also groups of the twins," Hermione said, stopping in front of her counterpart and smiling while the group stopped to observe their real counterparts.

"Are you really supposed to be me?" The real Luna asked her older versions.

"Only as close as Harry was able to make us act," one said. "We try to respond as the real one would and our strategies are based on those perceived personalities as well."

Hermione blinked. "Well, you certainly talk more like her than Harry."

"Well, women do tend to be more intelligent," another Luna stated, all of them looking at Hermione and smiling the same Luna smile.

At least until their heads snapped to the real Luna who was currently undoing clothing.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"Observational, comparison study?" The real Luna asked, looking at Hermione and not stopping her hands even as the Luna she was attempting to undress helped her for some ungodly reason in Hermione's eyes. It was only seconds before the Luna was standing there as naked as it was possible to get and looking as though it were an every day occurrence.

'Being a boy's head, I can't completely discount that possibility,' Hermione grumbled in the confines of her own mind. "What are you wanting to compare?" She asked aloud, honestly curious as Luna circled her older doppelganger with a critical eye. The only thing she allowed the older version of her to keep on were the bright yellow socks since the color was her favorite. It was such a happy color.

"Everything," Luna said with a shrug. "Notice, the nipples are the same color as my own. Considering Harry has seen me naked a few times, that is not too much of a stretch. However, this Luna's breasts are larger than my own by a fair degree, but not nearly as large as one would suspect a teenaged male would put onto a life-like doll he created in his head. Plus, while they are fun and perky," she said, bouncing her own clone's breasts much to both Hermione's shocked spluttering, 'the nipples themselves are slightly above the curvature of my heaving bosom.'

Hermione's left eyebrow twitched. "What does that have to do with stripping your clone?"

"It's a strange place to put it. Why not where they normally go? Also, my clone's bottom is vastly different from my own. Round and bouncy-"

SMACK!

"Oh, come on!" Hermione cried out.

"Basically, while my clone is very attractive, there are still minor deformities that shouldn't be there unless someone wanted them there. The dimple on the left cheek, for example. The curious trim of the pubic hair. Why is it like this?"

"We were designed by how Harry remembers us," the naked clone explained, playing with her own body as her personality was altered to add this real version's thoughts and actions, thus making it a stronger part of its mind. Moments later, nearly every Luna clone wondered at their bodies and were just as amazed as the original at how much fun the various parts were to play with. Unfortunately, since the real Luna was younger, and didn't really have those bits, it was a new experience for her. And the novelty was now something that would affect their personalities until either the real Luna no longer cared, or Harry somehow got them to stop poking themselves or bouncing things.

"What do you mean remembers you?" Hermione asked.

The clone's mouth worked, but no sound came out until suddenly, the clone Hermione was laughing and trying to cover for the Luna clone's slip, something Harry felt the real Luna would have done since the girl wasn't a liar and was usually brutally honest. "Oh, don't mind her! She's just thinking about the various thoughts Harry has had of the future."

Hermione's eyes narrowed, wondering if she was really that bad of a liar. But, her train of thought was viciously derailed as her clone's squawk of shock cut through her thoughts as she fended off the younger Luna's lightning fast hands. "Luna, what are you doing now?"

"Aren't you curious what he thinks of your body in the future?" Luna asked, not stopping her attempts to removing the older clone's

clothes. Well, not until the older clones of herself decided to help out and had the clone Hermione to her knickers before Hermione finally shrieked out a 'stop!'.

Hermione was about to tell Luna off for trying to forcibly disrobe her, even if it wasn't really her before she saw the clone's lacy knickers. Her thoughts suddenly stopped as she positioned her blushing counterpart in a pose to see the overall effect of them and nodded satisfactorily. She idly noted some of her clone's imperfections, curious about what she was seeing. Her trimming was different than she currently used, but she had to admit she rather liked the tiny triangle, her breasts were slightly smaller than Luna's, but fuller and her bottom, as she had thought in the past when she first saw her clone, was definitely the better of the two, along with the legs.

"What the hell?" Harry asked, causing all the girls to look at him, two Hermione's in shock and horror before the younger Hermione had her hands on the older's chest.

"HARRY! DON'T LOOK!"

Harry's gaze snapped to the younger Hermione, looking at her like she was crazy before he spun. "Get their clothes back on them!" He yelled indignantly. A minute later, and with a few protests from the Luna's, he was told it was okay to turn around, seeing five serene Luna's and two embarrassed Hermiones. This really wasn't their day!

"I was in the command center and talking with what is apparently my subconscious when I was told I need to get to this hall in a hurry and when I show up, you're stripping my patrols! What the hell?"

"I was curious about the differences between myself and my older version, then I, me, me, me and me started stripping Hermione because we were curious about her as well," Luna admitted.

Harry sighed, deciding to try and change the subject quickly so he didn't have to try and answer that. "You five, return to your patrols, please. You two, stop molesting my defenders and try to find some memories?" He nearly pled.

"Oh, all right," Luna mumbled, looking longingly at her retreating clones and then linking arms with Hermione and walking away. "Hermione, are there any Harry patrols?"

"Oh come on!" Harry yelled out after them.

"Not to strip," Luna promised. "I'm just curious about how you make your older self look." The two women left the muttering boy behind and continued on to the trophy room, which looked different than they remembered. Instead of school awards for people no one really remembered, it was achievements Harry felt he had in his life, including each encounter with Voldemort.

"All of them are here," Hermione whispered slightly in awe. Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest, drinking a unicorn's blood, the end of first year and the end of second year. All that was missing was the memory of his very first encounter, but didn't know that he was only through about half of his life and working backwards. It would be there eventually, in full glory.

"All of them?" Luna asked, somewhat eager to do so. No one but Harry himself knew as much as was in these memories.

"I can agree with that," Hermione said, both girls reaching for the first sphere and following the sequence.

xXxXxXx

"Ow," Hermione and Luna both grumbled, holding their heads as Harry snorted in amusement.

"He told you not to try and go past," he scolded lightly. The girls, after seeing his encounters with Voldemort, had tried to go to one of his forbidden areas that held information of the future. They were warned going forward would have them forcibly ejected with a massive headache which would be caused by a memory of one of his Voldemort-induced ones before being tossed out. The pain would make their own mental probes weak just long enough to push out, but the pain would remain for a few seconds as they remembered it, but not really be there.

"We thought we could take him," Luna said, pinching the bridge of her nose and trying to not let the light hit her eyes. "We were wrong... Owie."

Harry could tell only one more person was up and getting ready, so they hadn't been gone long. "Are you up to your attempt, Luna?" He asked.

"Yes," she nodded.

"Legilimens!" Harry and Hermione said as one.

xXxXxXx

Harry opened his eyes to see Hermione standing on a grassy meadow with a tree behind her. But, where there would normally be leaves, there was instead a giant walnut about the size of a house. "That's ... different."

Hermione, however, was staring in abject horror behind Harry and quite high up. Hearing him speak was only just enough motivation to make her whimper and point behind him and up, withdrawing in on herself and made him frown, turn, and then look up.

"Oh, shi-"

"CHITTER!" A forty-story tall squirrel chattered angrily at the two interlopers and spun as Harry was looking up, only for its large, bushy tail to hit both with the power of a freight train.

xXxXxXx

"AH!" Both Harry and Hermione launched at each other and held tightly, looking around for the giant squirrel of doom, shaking violently as their hearts hammered in their chests.

"Did you see Chi-Chi!" Luna asked happily, bouncing in her seat. "I got the idea of using that to defend with instead of myself from your minds! Isn't she great?"

Harry and Hermione hugged each other even tighter.

xXxXxXx



Harry took a moment to breathe while Luna was using the loo. He checked his watch and noted the time before looking at Hermione while both waited for her to finish and head to breakfast. "Hermione," he called out solemnly.

"Hm? What is it, Harry?" Hermione asked.

"Do you have your time-turner on you right now?" He asked, causing Hermione to look at Harry in shock, paling as her eyes darted around.

"Harry!" She hissed. "How do you know about that!"

"I'll explain everything in a few minutes. I've got mine. Go back four hours. I've noted the time and have my invisibility cloak. I need to talk to you."

"What do you mean you have yours?" Hermione asked. "And we can't just go back in the middle of the hall, we have no idea who was here then!"

"Then come on!" Harry said, dragging Hermione down the hall carefully, making sure not to hurt her and that she was moving under her own power. "We'll be ready to be back in time for Luna to get out of there with our older selves. I noted the time."

Minutes later, the two were in front of the Room of Requirement and now under Harry's invisibility cloak. "Harry, Professor McGonagall told me not to use this except to get to classes," Hermione warned nervously. While she also used it for added sleep, she felt it was necessary.

"Then do you just want to use mine?" Harry asked.

"How did you even get one?" Hermione asked.

"I've got around forty or so of them, some of them larger than this," he said, making her eyes bulge comically. "Did Professor McGonagall ever tell you you couldn't use use a different time-turner outside of class time?"

"No, but I don't think she honestly expected it to come up," Hermione grumbled. She blushed lightly as he moved close and pressed his body up against her own, putting their cheeks together to clasp the short chain around them both. She hugged him tight as he moved the dial and they disappeared in silence, the hall darkening around them to go back to very early morning.

She waited while Harry unclasped the time-turner and then put it back around his neck and allowed him to make the room, following him in. "How did you know about my time-turner? And don't you dare tell me if it'll cause a paradox!"

"This is going to be a very long story, Hermione," Harry warned. "That's why I wanted the four hours. It's also very complex, it does deal with time, but will not result in a paradox, which I have on the highest authority possible, I promise."

"Dumbledore knows about this?" Hermione asked, shocked. She was even more shocked when Harry erupted into riotous laughter.

"No! God no! If Dumbledore knew what I did, he'd obliviate me so bad I may as well be as bad off as that fool Lockhart and who knows what he'd try then."

"What?" Hermione asked, somehow being thrown for a loop.

Harry sighed and sat on the couch, motioning for Hermione to take the seat next to him. He watched her until she sat in the seat, looking unsure of how they got there. "Okay, starting from the beginning. I was sent back in time from when I was seventeen years old to my twelve-year old self."

"You what?" Hermione asked, wondering if she could really believe that.

"When you woke up after being petrified, did I seem different from what you remember?" Harry asked. "This summer, this year?"

"I suppose so," Hermione admitted. "I mean, you're more interested in your school work, you're more open to physical affection and you do have a better understanding of your work. And then there's the whole patronus thing. Plus you have been much more confident than you used to be," she ended with a blush. She tried to look him

in the eye, but kept darting it off to the side before coming back to him.

"You mean flirting with you over the summer and letting you see how I think about you?" He asked, making her blush even harder and nod even while he blushed lightly himself.

"Yea, that along with the way you carry yourself," Hermione said quietly.

"Well, that was from spending time in a war after Voldemort came back and leading an underground dueling club," Harry said before shaking his head. "Look, this may be easier if I start at the beginning of coming back and what led up to coming back."

"First, this year isn't as bad as any others," Harry began. "Sirius is actually innocent of everything he was accused of except escaping Azkaban. He was never given a trial and just chunked into prison. I originally learned about your time-turner at the end of this year when we used it to save Sirius' life."

"Oh. Wow," Hermione said, wondering at yet another adventure. "And I actually went back with you and helped you?"

"Yea," Harry smiled warmly. "It was also the first time I cast a corporeal patronus to save yours, mine and Sirius' life from about a hundred dementors. Apparently, we went back in time and our future selves saved our younger, though I thought it was my dad at first. Turns out, Professor Lupin is a werewolf and changed that same night. Sirius was fighting him to keep us safe and Snape tried to get Sirius killed and got Remus fired."

"That's why you called him Moony!" Hermione said, connecting the dots.

"Yea, he was my father's friend, along with Sirius. Ron's rat is actually Peter Pettigrew. He was the real secret keeper for my parents and traitor. They're all animagus. That's why Crookshanks doesn't like Scabbers. He's a murderer, traitor and hiding out in animal form."

Hermione scowled. "I never did like that rat."

Harry blinked curiously. "You're taking this fairly well and don't seem to need much proof," he said.

"I don't think you'd lie to me," Hermione stated. "You may tease me, but this is a little serious. I'm still holding out on a decision though until I hear you out. I'm rather curious about how going back in time and going through all this isn't going to cause a paradox."

"Long story short, I died, wasn't supposed to and those in the afterlife sent me back, paradox-free. Here, let me show you my memories," Harry said, gesturing at the pensieve.

"I would like that, thank you," Hermione said, looking excited.

"First warning," Harry said. "The powers that be will not accept you deciding to discuss this with anyone else, do you understand? You will not go to Dumbledore, McGonagall or even Merlin himself if he returned. This is basically an order from the people who decide our fates when we die."

Hermione shivered at the intended threat risk. "I understand."

Harry took the next hour and a half to show Hermione each memory with Lora. Their first meeting in which he woke up in that waiting room and then learned the horrible truth, that he died several times, on the train, at his home after their shopping trip and the final time right before the Wizengamot meeting, which Hermione realized as when he really began to act differently.

[For these scenes, please refer to Ch-1, Ch-4 & Ch-13 – I shall not force you to reread these here.]

"Okay, hang on," Hermione said, taking out some parchment and quill, taking several notes over the major things she heard to bring up. After five minutes or so of writing, she read over it and then nodded, happy with it. "Okay. So, you were seventeen and went back in time to when you were twelve. You and I died because we didn't know warding well enough, which is part of why you're so interested in it right now, I'm assuming?"

"Yea," Harry said sadly. "I didn't remember what happened at first until reminded about at least a part of it. I was really angry that we went out that way."

"And so, the Lora girl you mentioned is your Angel of Death?" Hermione asked, rather glad it wasn't some romantic interest he hadn't mentioned.

"Yea."

"And you and I are soulmates, and apparently, so are you and Luna," Hermione asked in a way that sounded as statement and maybe a little accusing or perhaps petulant.

"Er, yea," Harry said, scratching his head and looking to the side, away from Hermione. "When I came back, I thought about what she said and I couldn't figure out why I never thought about you that way. I mean, like I said at the store, I think you're pretty and there really isn't any reason against it. I even realized I ... liked the idea," he said with a blush.

"Well, Lora said you were under love potions from Molly and Ginny ... Was that serious, do you think?" She asked, kind of hoping Harry had discovered that was wrong. She didn't really expect the controllers of the afterlife to be wrong, but she could hope.

"I'm pretty sure it was likely," Harry sighed. "I don't know if you know it this time around, but Molly had gloated about how she had used a love potion on Arthur to get him and it's one of Ginny's favorite stories. And in my sixth year, I remember suddenly thinking of almost nothing but her."

"And Luna? Is that why you've been so distant recently? Lora seemed rather ... scary that last time you saw her," she asked.

Harry sighed. "In my last life, Luna was one of five people who never, not even once, turned their backs on me. But, other than you, she was the only one who was really close. Sirius and I had become a little close with a chance for living away from the Dursleys, but he died in our fifth year and Luna was the only person who could really relate to me and she helped me out a lot. Plus we had a lot of discussions throughout the year about life in general and our pasts."

"That's how you got to know her," Hermione said in dawning realization. "She told you about how she was treated."

"And I was a very bad friend then, too," Harry said in more than a little shame. "She was mocked and ridiculed and you and I had played a part in it. We called her the same names as everyone else. She had been alone and suffered as you know now, but throughout all six years she was at Hogwarts. She never had even one friend. I mean, Ginny was her friend before Hogwarts, but look at them now. They don't even talk to one another."

"It's kind of hard to imagine that," Hermione said with a frown. "I mean, I can kind of understand it, but I can't really see myself being mean to her." Hermione looked up to Harry and considered him for a moment. "Were you together with her then?" She doubted it considering what he said, but if he wasn't with her, and Luna was another possible soul mate, then it was still possible.

"No," Harry admitted. "I was too self-absorbed. Basically, I was worried about being associated with her, so I was really only friendly in private or amicable in public. I was really ashamed of that, so I decided I'd be better to her this time around like she was to us."

Hermione was fairly sure she should focus more on the time-travel, but after the past few months and the recent frustration, her attention was instead in a place deemed more important to her at that time. "What do you think about Luna now, though? I mean, why are you so upset about what Lora was telling you the other day? I mean, if you're soul mates...", she trailed off, trying to see where he would go on his own.

"Towards the beginning of the year after I found Luna locked in a closet, I promised I would never stop being her friend. And I meant it, too. At the very least, I can not stop being her friend. After this long, and the trust she has in us, it would completely crush her. I honestly don't think she would ever trust anyone again," he said miserably.

Hermione nodded, seeing it as a very likely possibility. "And what about the soul mate thing? What do you feel for her?"

"I ... like her, yes," Harry admitted. "If I didn't also like you, I could probably be willing to date her. But, I do like you and ... I was kind of looking forward to the idea of seeing if you'd want to date me. That's kind of why I flirted with you over the summer. But, it's also why I really slowed it down during the school year. Some of how I felt

about you both from before I came back came with me, so my feelings are kind of ... jumbled up."

"You assume I would agree to dating you," Hermione said, a part of the hurt she felt at him admitting to liking Luna causing her to voice the thought.

"I think we both know we're both interested," Harry countered with a chuckle. "That wasn't my memory I viewed this morning."

Hermione blushed brilliantly, neither admitting or denying his statement.

"Hermione, I'm going to be honest," Harry said with a sigh after a few seconds of awkward silence. "I want to date you. I want to be able to hold you, kiss you, call you mine and never let you go. But, a part of me feels the same for Luna, just not quite as strong really, but just like with you, it grows every day. And I know I would never cheat on you, but I also know it would be wrong of me to pursue a relationship when I know Luna is going to stay by our side, just as you both promised this morning, and that she'll hurt in silence over it before eventually hoping to die in a fight to get away from it."

Harry clenched his fists, scoffing in disgust. "I don't know how to not hurt her. The only way for sure would be to date her, but I am finding the one time I really want to be selfish, I don't want to give you up. I was really looking forward to dating you."

Hermione smiled, looking down. "I ... was looking forward to you dating me too," she said.

"Was'?" Harry asked, not looking at Hermione.

The brunette looked at Harry, truly looked at him, and realized she didn't want to give him up, either. "Would you want to get together right now, even if it meant hurting Luna?" She asked as answer, watching him flinch.

"No," he whispered at length, looking miserable.

"You told me about this year," Hermione said, deciding to shelve the topic for a few minutes. "What about from then until you came back?"

Harry sighed and leaned back. "This summer is the Quidditch World Cup. The Weasleys took us and there was a Death Eater attack, but no one we know was hurt, though it was close. Then next year is the Tri-Wizard Tournament-"

"I meant to ask about that," Hermione said, making a note on her parchment.

"Basically, our DADA teacher was a polyjuiced impostor who entered me illegally, I was forced to compete and the entire school turned against me except for you," he said with a small smile. "There were people who didn't voice out against me, but no one but you actually supported me. Even Ron turned against me. He got angry because he thought I entered without telling him how and then he was basically like Malfoy until I got through the first task. Once the school was happy with me again, then he came back. That's actually a trend of his."

"Anyway," Harry continued, "you helped me train, just the two of us, and helped me learn the summoning charm to summon my broom for the task and I outflew a dragon."

"Dragon!" Hermione screeched, looking horrified.

"Yea," Harry chuckled. "Nesting mothers. We had to get a golden egg from their clutch. Anyway, after that was a Yule Ball. You were beautiful, by the way," he said, making her blush. "I'm not just saying that. You truly were. And you were on the arm of Viktor Krum, an international Quidditch star that Ron had a man-crush on."

Hermione snorted. "I bet he hated that."

"He did," Harry confirmed. "Called you a traitor. It may have also been because he tried to ask you to the ball as well, but did it in a really insulting fashion. But, Krum had already asked you by that point and you were rather scathing in your refusal."

"Anyway, even though we barely talked, Ron was my hostage for the second task, which was to retrieve a person from the bottom of the Black Lake. You were Krum's hostage. You were also hit pretty hard in the newspapers by a vile woman named Rita Skeeter who



writes badly about everyone she can. Then the third task came up and I was kidnapped and my blood used to resurrect Voldemort-"

Hermione gasped in fear and despair, hating how Harry had to go through that.

"-and Cedric was taken with me, but he was killed. I was able to get away and bring his body back, but Minister Fudge refused to believe me about it. That summer, the Prophet said I was delusional and turning dark and other such stupid things. But, a woman named Umbridge sent two dementors after me to try and kill me, but I defended myself and Dudley. Then I was put on trial for underage magic and breaking the Statute of Secrecy."

"What! How could they do that!" Hermione yelled, furious on Harry's behalf. "Didn't that woman die, though?"

"Yes," Harry said quietly. Too quietly, actually.

"Harry?" Hermione asked carefully.

Harry simply looked up slowly and then stared into Hermione's eyes which widened a second later before she couldn't look at him and her gaze moved downwards. "She created muggleborn camps, Hermione. Think Nazi concentration camps. They were subjected to torture, rape, experiments and were used to train new Death Eater recruits. This is the same woman who hires people to kill off families to get their family libraries and wants to kill any half-breed in existence."

"It doesn't make it right, Harry," Hermione said quietly, not sure how to take what she just heard.

"She tortured students," Harry continued, making Hermione look at him in shock. "In our fifth year, she becomes our DADA teacher, which is why you made me start the underground dueling club and teach it. She taught blood purity, gave Malfoy and Death Eater children the right to assign detentions, take points and use magic in the halls, including hurting students. She made me use a blood quill to write lines that literally etched it into my hand 'I will not tell lies' when I said Voldemort came back. She used the Cruciatus on several students and she sent people out to kill your family."

"What?" Hermione asked aghast, suddenly fearing for her parents.

"You made your parents leave your house by that point, but it was burned to the ground," Harry explained.

Hermione looked like she was going to be sick, but held it together fairly well. "Continue," she said at last.

"I got off from the trial, but the next year, we dealt with Umbridge and her work with Fudge to restrict the school in a bunch of ways with decrees to stop things or dictate what we learned and how and what we couldn't. I was also getting a bunch of visions from Voldemort. Then, during OWL's, I got a vision that had me running to the Ministry to save Sirius, along with you, Luna, Neville, Ron and Ginny against twelve of Voldemort's inner circle. We actually came out of it alive, except you were the most heavily injured. But, Voldemort showed up and everyone in the Ministry who came by after alarms were tripped saw him, so people knew he was finally back."

Hermione made a few notes on her parchment, writing furiously and trying not to think of what could have happened to her parents. "Was my mother pregnant before?" She asked curiously.

"I swear I had nothing to do with that!" Harry denied loudly. "I don't know how that happened!"

Hermione giggled despite herself. "I'll take that as a no, then."

"That summer, Dumbledore kept me under lock and key and no one was allowed to communicate with me, even though I was sent back to the Dursleys and I had just watched my godfather die, just like the year before after watching Cedric die, though you each sent one or two letters that basically said 'keep a stiff upper lip' until I was free." Harry rolled his eyes, past annoyances coming to the fore as he remembered how he felt.

"We didn't talk to you at all?" Hermione asked, easily reading Harry wasn't fond of that. She mentally checked off to ensure she never did that this time around.

"No. But, Dumbledore also forced it and kept letters from me. So, while I didn't know it at the time, it wasn't totally your fault. But, sixth

year, you and I stopped really talking for a while. I think you may have been under a potion or something, too, because you got angry because I used notes from a second-hand book in potions and did better than you because of it and you got angry with me for all sorts of things that just seemed like a reason to yell at me. You even hexed McLaggen to get Ron onto the Quidditch team when he tried out, but got pissed at me for tricking Ron into thinking I gave him a good luck potion. And you did a lot of other hypocritical things like that, so I'm not sure if you were or not," Harry said.

"You're right, that doesn't sound like me at all," Hermione worried her lip as she considered what she was hearing.

"Well, towards the end of the year, Draco managed to allow a bunch of Death Eaters into the school. We lost a couple dozen students, Lavender got hurt by a werewolf but didn't catch the full disease. Snape killed Dumbledore and I ran him out of the school, though that was before he actually decided to kick my arse at the edge of the wards."

"God," Hermione breathed. "How did Draco do it?"

"A teleporting cabinet, basically. But I've already removed it and got the other side of it, so it can't be used," Harry explained. "There are a few secret passages, though. I'm not sure why Voldemort never used them, though. I mean, he found Salazar's secret chamber. You'd think a hidden passageway would have been easy enough as well."

"What happened then?" Hermione asked.

"After that, we went home for the summer. Me to the Dursleys' and you straight to the Burrow, from what I understand. You went home to get your parents to go to Australia, though. Voldemort attacked the Burrow during a wedding, Bill to a champion from the Tournament, a girl named Fleur that Ginny and Molly were absolutely horrible towards even though she's a wonderful girl and you even made friends with her once you got to know her. She's part Veela, so she has an attraction that kind of pulls men in. Ron can't be around her without being a drooling idiot. Most of the other guys we know and spend time with are okay around her, though."

"What about you?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Pretty much immune," Harry explained. "I can fight off any Imperius put on me, and it's sort of the same."

"You've been under that?" Hermione asked.

"The fake teacher puts all of us under it in fourth year and Voldemort tried as well," Harry explained. "Anyway, we left the Burrow and went on a hunt for the items that Voldemort uses to remain alive, Horcruxes. Basically, he splits part of his soul and places it in an object then, if he dies, his soul remains on earth. I destroyed one already, have another one and will be getting the third probably this Christmas or summer. It's not dangerous, I just want to wait until it's much easier."

"You're sure it isn't dangerous?" Hermione asked, looking at him carefully.

"Completely," Harry said with a smirk. "If I get Sirius to get it for me, there's no danger at all. He just has to go to his house where it was hidden by a family member who wanted to destroy it, then bring it to me to finish the job. The only reason there's any risk at all is a house elf that believes the same pureblood crap as his masters did. But, Sirius can tell him to not hurt anyone."

After a few moments of careful scrutiny, Hermione finally nodded. "Okay, continue," she said.

"During the hunt, Ron ate most of our food and then got tired of running around looking for those items. He was angry when we were running low on food and you wouldn't let him keep eating and he didn't like all the walking. There may have been more that caused him to finally blow up, but that was most of what he complained about. Well, that and because he couldn't do things without magic and kept getting angry when you tried to tell him how to do things since Voldemort had taken over the Ministry and we couldn't use much magic, safely."

"He eventually left us. He asked you to make a choice and you stayed with me. We eventually find Gryffindor's brooch about a month and a half later, but you know how that turned out," he said uneasily.

"When did we talk about all those things you know about me we haven't discussed yet?" Hermione asked. "Like my school days and the like?"

"When Ron left, our trip got a lot easier," Harry said. "And with it just being us, we stopped using warming charms that failed in the middle of the night and just slept in the same bed and would talk a lot and generally got more comfortable around each other."

"How," Hermione began, her face heating up again. "How comfortable, exactly? That ... older version of me in your mind and some of those fantasies I saw ... They were very accurate."

"By choice, we slept in the same bed and in light clothing since our body heat helped tremendously with the blankets," Harry said with a blush. "But, not by so much choice, we had a few walk-in accidents in the shower or while changing. Plus, you got into healing by necessity and whenever I'd get stupid, you'd be there to heal me, so you saw a lot of me on a fairly regular basis."

"Oh," Hermione blushed. "It kind of isn't fair that you've got these memories and I don't. I mean, you know what's going to be on the OWL's and know exactly what to study!"

Harry chuckled. "Well, except for Runes and Arithmancy, yes. And, you don't have to worry. I can always show you my memories of some of those classes if you want to try and learn some of the stuff early. Just not right now."

"What about Dumbledore and that prophecy?" Hermione asked.

"Basically, the prophecy says it'll be me or Voldemort. Dumbledore's known since before I was born and didn't once tell me anything or train me. Hell, he even knows about the horcruxes right now and hasn't said a thing about it. And in his will, he left you a children's book, me a snitch, and Ron a thing to put out lights. He didn't give us advice on how to win or give us direction. The only thing he did show me was Voldemort's history and told me what a horcrux was in general terms. We had to figure everything else out on our own!"

"He didn't train you at all?" Hermione asked, sounding offended.

"Not a single thing," Harry confirmed. "That's why I'm not really being too helpful with him this year."

Hermione growled and looked at her watch, then at her list before nodding resolutely. "Okay Harry. I understand and I think that's enough for now. We need to meet up with Luna soon if we don't want her to know we left her for now."

Harry winced, looked depressed again, which Hermione noted. She nibbled her bottom lip, coming to a decision. 'I've always figured out the answers he needs. I can do it again,' she thought as she got up and leaned over to him. She pressed her lips against his own, feeling a violent shiver race down her spine that seemed to end at the juncture between her legs and made her moan in approval as she felt his arms wrap around her. Her hands fisted his hair and pulled him harder against her as she felt his body press against her own. When she felt his tongue against her lips, she opened them and gently touched it with her own before sucking gently on it as she pulled back, smirking as she felt his appreciation press into her. "Let's be selfish, Harry. Just for once, let's do something because we want it, okay?"

Harry blinked rapidly in confusion.

"You trust me, don't you Harry?" Hermione asked after a moment.

"Of course!" He exclaimed. "But what-"

"Shh," she said, swooping down to kiss him again and relishing at the feelings that raced throughout her body. She tingled in places she didn't even know she had and wanted to claim him as her own, even if it left her with no choice but to figure out how to help with Luna. "I will figure out a way to help with Luna," she said after she pulled back from him again.

"Does this mean you're my girlfriend?" Harry asked, looking and sounding somewhat dazed.

"Do you want me to be?" Hermione asked, wondering if he had come to a different decision.

"I want a lot more than girlfriend from you," Harry responded immediately, his voice low and his gaze penetrating in a way that

made her quake and plunder his mouth once again with a ferocity he had only ever known her to put into her homework or keeping him alive.

"It's yours," she breathed after she retreated once again. She squeezed her legs together, trapping his own between them as she laid on him on the couch, going down to steal another kiss. She had no idea what it was, but now that everything had been admitted and there were no doubts, she just couldn't stop. His lips and the delightful sounds they made together were far too addicting. It was only when she realized they were rolling their hips against one another that she remembered Luna and the time.

"Oh," she moaned, double-checking her watch. They had just been kissing and – she checked where their hands were to confirm – touching very tender places on each other, though nowhere that would be too much, quite yet. Well, except for the wonderful squeezing she felt on her bottom since that was the one place he had ready access to. 'God, don't let that stop,' she begged, letting out a breathy moan as she sat up, only to shiver at the sharp gaze locked onto her eyes. "We have to go. We've barely enough time to get to Luna now."

Hermione stood up on shaky legs, wondering where their usual strength had gone and watched her new boyfriend get up and readjust himself through hazy brown eyes. She could almost swear she felt a part of him inside of her, deeper within her than her body could possibly be. But she really didn't mind it. She liked it.

"God," Harry moaned, pinching the bridge of his nose under his glasses once he figured out where they were and put them on. "What the hell am I going to do about Luna?"

"Let me handle that," Hermione said, coming up and hugging him, only to squeak and moan as Harry molded his body to her and nibbled on her neck, causing her to cling to him before shaking off the feeling and pulling back. "T-time to get back," Hermione gasped out.

"You're right, sorry," Harry apologized. "I just can't seem to get enough of you."

Hermione smiled despite herself, but still managed to keep her distance and start walking to the door. "Don't apologize Harry. I really enjoy it. We'll have to ... come up with some rules later or something, but that will definitely be within them."

As they walked hand-in-hand under the invisibility cloak, Hermione nibbled her bottom lip, ignoring where it had just been, and tried to decide on one of two paths she knew to be open to her while trying to determine more of them.

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Sirius Black coughed as he returned to human form outside of Gringotts. There was currently no one around and the bank itself was already open, which suited the escaped non-convict just fine. He passed the guards at the doors without a glance and walked in, glad the goblins were neutral territory. They didn't care about his status as a fugitive, even if it would have been true. As long as he had gold and was willing to part with it, then they would gladly do business with him.

It was about as early on a Friday morning as you could get, at least by wizarding standards, but the bank itself never closed since some rather unscrupulous people would rather do their work during off-hours. The dirty man went to a teller and bowed his head. "Sirius Black to pay Gringotts to make a high-profile purchase and send it to Lord Harry James Potter."

The goblin's head snapped up, then nodded once curtly. "Very well. Follow me, human." The goblin hopped down from its stool and strode quickly to an office where the manager of the Black estate would be, or his subordinate. Luck was with the Marauder, however, since it was the man in charge.

"Bloodclaw, this wizard would do business with you," the teller said. "He wishes to provide service to the bank and deal with Lord Potter."

The older goblin looked at Sirius carefully, noting the wizard's unease at the lengths they were going for the request when such a thing would normally be handled at the teller station. "Entry is given for this meeting. How can Gringotts help you today, Lord Black?"



"Why the break of standard protocol?" Sirius asked, allowing his confusion to surface.

"Lord Potter is favored by our people. That you wish to make a purchase and send something to him through us is out of the norm as well. He is your godson, correct?"

"Yes," Sirius stated proudly. "Now why have you called me Lord Black? I was disowned and have only my private vault."

"You were never disowned, or it didn't happen legally. Either way, we have never had you stricken from the ledgers," Bloodclaw stated brusquely. "As you are of age and there is nothing to legally keep you from your Lordship, you have gained it once your younger brother died, provisional until you accept it magically, of course."

Sirius knew this was a golden opportunity. This would keep it from going to those who would abuse it. He had believed his mother was serious when she said she had him disowned, but apparently not. And he knew there was always the chance that his sister Narcissa could have laid claim to the title through her spawn if she revoked the Malfoy name. But, if he could do this, first, then there was nothing to fear in that.

"I, Sirius Orion Black, do hereby lay claim to the Lord of Black title and all that it entails. So mote it be!" The magic of their family name, which was attached to their blood, was thus activated and magical ownership of all that was theirs was now at his fingertips, including a gaudy ring that encircled his right ring finger.

"Very good, Lord Black. Now, what are your demands?" It was never requests with the goblins, but demands. They followed more human customs when they worked with the young or extremely wealthy, but those who knew their ways would know they did not like niceties.

"I would charge Gringotts with acquiring a Firebolt to be delivered to Lord Potter for Christmas. I will also create a Last Will and Testament as my old one from the last war doesn't include all the Black holdings."

Minutes later, Sirius left a will for everything he owned to go to Lord Potter except for five hundred thousand galleons that was to go to Andromeda Tonks with a note apologizing for what their family had

done to her and telling his story along with a request to not do anything foolish on his behalf, a hundred thousand galleons to go to Nymphadora Tonks, through Andromeda since he knew the girl but could only vaguely recall her after his stint in Azkaban, and finally another five hundred thousand galleons to go to Remus Lupin. Only those financial amounts were to be transferred immediately.

Once Lord Black had left, the goblins set out to obtain the broom in question while also sending Harry a letter he would get in a few days.

Lord Potter,

Per our previous discussions, the items you requested have been finalized. Please come to Gringotts at your earliest opportunity to complete our barter.

Griphook,

Potter Account Manager

Gringotts Bank, London

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Harry had been in good spirits since early the morning before. Aside from finding out that kissing can get so much better than a soggy pressing of lips and heavy sobbing, or feeling like you were kissing your sister and desiring it anyway while worrying about why you were attracted to a woman that looked like your mother, he had finally explained the situation with Luna and the time-traveling to Hermione! And even better, Hermione promised she would be thinking of a solution in how to protect Luna from a depressing and horrible future!

Harry trusted Hermione enough to believe she could do it. That girl was just incredible like that. She had been making a list of questions, he had noticed, and asked several when they were alone to get things clear in her mind, but that was to be expected. After all, she wanted a memory of the OWL's, too. 'It isn't cheating,' she had said when he brought it up, 'to have a study guide for a huge test.' Naturally, he agreed with her. They had just decided not to do anything with it until they solved things with Luna, whose snuggle-happy ways seemed much more telling to the two new lovebirds.

Now, it was the night after that and rather late. Dobby had warned that the Minister had stopped sleeping at his office when Angelica refused to keep sleeping there and was now at his own home and his own bed. Thankfully, he still wore the emergency portkey.

So now, Harry was wearing Lucius Malfoy's face with polyjuice, at twenty minutes of his hour's length of time. Dobby had checked and the Minister was sleeping soundly while his wife snored along beside him. "Ready, Elf?"

"I is ready, Master," the elf replied, popping both to the Minister's bedroom.

Harry stepped out of the shadows that his assassin's outfit naturally seemed to wrap around him. He was using Malfoy's stolen wand and cast a simple confundus on both people so it appeared to them that he was wearing Death Eater robes, but not the mask. He then stunned Fudge's wife and then walked to the door, opening it just enough to slam it slightly and curse as though it had been an accident.

Fudge bolted awake, looking around nervously only to pale as soon as he saw what appeared to be Lucius Malfoy standing at the foot of his bed. "L-L-Lucius!" Fudge rolled quickly to try and grab his wand from the bed stand table, but whimpered as it sailed into Fudge's waiting hand from a simple summoning charm.

"My, my, Cornelius," Lucius spoke in silky tones Harry felt were like the man. "It would appear you no longer trust me."

"N-now, let's talk about this, Lucius! I d-don't b-believe you had anything to do with Delores' murder!" Fudge tried to shake his wife awake, hoping she could grab her own wand. He knew he would be far too slow to get hers before Lucius killed him for even the attempt. He knew Lucius was a ruthless bastard.

"Oh, Cornelius. How you disappoint me. Dealing with the Potter brat of all people. You think just because he's the child of prophecy, that would excuse you for letting him gain his lordship?"

"W-w-w-what prophecy?" Fudge stuttered. "And there was nothing I could do about his lordship! He was legally allowed to have it! There

was nothing in the laws to stop him. Even Dumbledore tried and failed!" He was now shaking his wife so hard the woman would probably have a sore shoulder in the morning.

"Oh, stop bothering with her," Lucius sneered. "I ensured she would remain asleep for our discussion. If that is to be a temporary or permanent thing is all up to you, of course."

"What d-do you what?" Fudge asked.

"My master is going to return, Cornelius," Lucius said with a false happiness that Fudge bought. "Potter just wasn't quite powerful enough to totally destroy him as an infant, but he must be eliminated before my Master returns. And you have allowed him a way to train his friends during the summer. If you allow Potter to gain power as the prophecy suggests, then my Master will fall and I cannot have that!" Lucius roared, sending a whip-like tendril of magic out to slap Fudge on the cheek.

"My lord demands this world and everyone within, Cornelius. And I cannot have that ready to give him with you in charge. You are growing to be too much of a hassle and I cannot let you become an asset to Potter. That would be an emergency that my Master would punish me for. No one knows where I am, after all. I have all the time I need these past few days."

"My aurors will kill you if you kill me," Fudge tried to scare the man.

"Foolish puppet," Lucius sneered. "I have an emergency portkey made by my master long ago. It will shatter any anti-portkey ward to get me to one of our safe houses. Goodbye, Cornelius. I will miss playing you for the fool. Avada Ke-!"

"Emergency portkey, activate!" Fudge yelled, remembering his own emergency portkey when Lucius mentioned his own. He felt a little bad about leaving his wife behind, but hopefully Lucius would kill her and it would open the way to marry Angelica. He was sure she would appreciate the position of power, even if it would mean a lot more intimacy.

Fudge bent his legs just in time to land properly in a dark room that had stone beneath his feet. As soon as he arrived, dozens of torches lit automatically, showing a very ... dank sewer-like room

with a giant bust of an ugly man that made Fudge squeak for a moment before he fainted.

Meanwhile, back at Fudge's home, Harry rolled Lucius' eyes and threw Fudge's wand down and sent a few blasting hexes at the walls and windows to get the aurors running before he awakened Fudge's wife, cursing Fudge for managing to escape his killing curse and allowing the now-screaming woman to see his face before both heard the aurors rushing the halls.

"Next time, you'll die too, woman!" Lucius snarled before disappearing as if moving to both sides and just fading away just as the aurors kicked the bedroom door in. All they saw was Lucius' head and a screaming portly woman who had the sheets clutched to her chins.

"Check the powder room and closet!" The lead auror said. "Call the boss. Ma'am, can you tell us what happened?"

The woman told them everything she saw and heard, screaming every single syllable.

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Harry arrived at Potter Manor and put his time-turner away before allowing his assassin robe to change back to his day clothes as his adrenaline wore off. This one had been close as a matter of necessity. He had to be seen as Lucius to throw off suspicion towards himself, whether there was any or not. But, if those aurors had come in firing first, he could have been toast.

He stripped down and got into the shower to remove the muggle hair gel he had used to try and emulate the aristocratic Death Eater's own style, mentally snickering that his nearly fourteen-year old's tackle was of equal or partly greater size than Draco's dad's. It wasn't that Harry really looked, but it seemed as such.

He kind of wondered if that could have been why the bastard and Narcissa slept in different rooms.

Still, once out, and feeling clean from what he had just done, he looked into the mirror to admire his own form, glad to be back in it, and then dressed and shifted to the Chamber of Secrets, just

outside the last door to enter so Fudge couldn't see him and risk seeing how it was the same way Lucius left.

Harry opened the door and walked in, only to snort as he saw Fudge had passed out. "Hey, wake up," he ordered, shaking the pudgy minister's shoulder.

"What? Ah!" Fudge jerked back and looked around wildly.

"Minister? What are you doing here? Did something happen?" Harry asked, looking confused and trying to pull off the sleepy look.

"Harry! Thank you for the portkey!" Fudge said, actually hugging Harry and making the younger boy very uncomfortable. "You were right! That bastard Malfoy just tried to kill me! I used your portkey to get out of there right away just as he was sending the killing curse after me!"

"What happened to your cheek, Sir?" Harry asked, looking concerned. "And are you hurt? Do you need to see Madam Pomfrey?"

"Just a slap, dear boy," Fudge said with a weak smile. "The fool thought to try and torture me a bit for information, but I held strong."

Harry almost burst out laughing, but wisely held it in. "That's horrible! You should really see Madam Pomfrey, sir!"

"No, no!" Fudge stopped him from pulling the man along. "I just need to get to the Ministry and let them know I was able to fight the man off long enough to activate the portkey."

"This way, then, if you're sure," Harry said, leading the man out.

"Er, Harry," Fudge began slowly, wondering how much the boy knew. "Do you know if there's a prophecy about you?"

"Hm?" Harry asked, sounding disinterested as best he could. "Oh, yea. Sure. Not sure what it says, but I know there's at least one about me somewhere in the Ministry where they store those things."

Fudge paled. "Do ... Do you happen to believe that ... that You-Know-Who may come back?"

"Well," Harry said, stopping to look at the older man and put on a thinking expression. "In first year, he had possessed our DADA teacher, Quirrell. He tried to kill me that year, but I won. Then last year, he had possessed a girl here, Ginny Weasley. I managed to win that, too, and save her. So, I figure he's trying to come back, at least. But, as long as he does, I'll be here to keep protecting my friends and loved ones," Harry said, smiling innocently and leading the crying Minister for Magic to the mouth of the Chamber of Secrets that would lead to the girl's loo and creating stairs.

"You're a parselmouth?" Fudge asked, now scared.

"Uh huh," Harry said. "I wasn't originally. It was in my family line through Slytherin, but I didn't actually have it. But, when I beat the Dark Wanker the first time, I got it from magical conquest. Or at least, that's what I've been led to believe. Apparently, it's also pretty big in the Eastern countries. But, I don't know. I don't even know when I use it unless I do it on purpose. I've also heard it drives women wild," Harry said with a wink, smirking at the Minister. "I figure I'll learn that for fact or not when I'm a little older."

Fudge was a little worried about himself right now. A part of him knew Lucius had been spouting off things he probably wouldn't have if he hadn't expected to be capable of killing the Minister and planning on it. But, that gave him knowledge that would probably make him an even larger target, now. However, that same knowledge said this boy was probably going to become one of the most powerful men in the wizarding world and he was worried he, too, would try to be rid of Cornelius. The Minister for Magic was absolutely not happy with that idea! "What, er, do you think your long-term goals are for the future, Harry?" He asked as they started their way to the first floor.

"Honestly?" Harry asked, deciding to be just that. "When all is said and done, I just want to be left alone, have my family and settle down. I will work in politics if I have to, but really, I just don't care. If I can make things better for everyone, then I'll certainly try. But, the muggles learned that the more people there are, and the more who are allowed to do things, the more money there is everywhere and that those in charge get. They learned that by not segregating and by doing things for the people, they actually get more money than just by accepting bribes or by trying to isolate a certain people. So, I

may try to show that to the government some time and see if they'll accept it. I mean, there are a huge number of muggles, so it's pretty obvious when you have that many people that, if something works for that many, it works."

Fudge, not knowing exactly what Harry was saying, since the boy was just trying to manipulate the older man anyway, simply understood that the muggles learned a way to make more money than bribery. Perhaps they weren't totally worthless after all? "I don't see many people following that line of thinking, but if they saw it as a way to make money, then maybe."

"If they really wanted money," Harry said, "then they'd try to work with muggleborns. I mean, the more witches and wizards there are, the more people there are to spend money."

Somehow, that seemed revolutionary to Fudge. "Well, my boy, I believe this is where I'll leave you. I need a good, stiff drink and to send out hunting parties for Malfoy while seeing if my wife is okay."

"The ring will recharge within a few days, but I don't know how long. It depends on whether you went through wards you aren't allowed to," Harry explained. "So be careful, Minister."

"I will, thank you, Harry." Fudge said, slipping through the gates that opened as Harry approached. Were Fudge a smarter man, he'd have wondered about that.

Harry sighed once the man disappeared with a crack. While it was harder to apparate without a wand, he wasn't about to walk in the dark with dementors still around the school. Still, Harry turned and decided to ignore his exercises that day. He had been up for a while and there was a very warm bed with his name on it and dreams of enthusiastic, bushy-haired kisses to get to.

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Emma smiled brightly as a snow owl descended onto her breakfast table with a letter tied to its talon. It had been just over two weeks since she had sent a letter to Hermione about being pregnant again and she was honestly unsure of what her little girl would say or think. After all, Dan and Emma were getting on in years. They had been in their mid-twenties when they had Hermione and were now about to



celebrate their fortieth years. Well, forty-second for Daniel. That wasn't apparently a big deal for magicals, but for muggles, it most certainly was a bit of a rarity.

The woman glanced up to the ceiling where she could hear the shower running and her husband's poor attempt at singing. She hadn't told him yet. She had been a little worried about jinxing it, but knew she wouldn't be able to put it off much longer. She had been willing to wait until she got a response from Hermione, but no longer. She knew it took a few days to go between their home and Scotland to that castle, so the time wasn't unexpected, but it was nerve wracking.

With a sigh, the eldest Granger woman opened the parchment and began reading.

Hi Mum! Hi Dad!

I'm so sorry this was so much later getting to you! To be honest, I wasn't sure what to say. I'm so happy for you! And I'm thrilled to become a big sister! It was a bit of a shock to realize, however, that I now believe I know exactly why Dad was grinning like a loon for a week straight. Well, I already knew, but honestly.

I'm getting off topic, I'm sorry. I'm really glad we're going to be expanding the family. I admit I believe this is a little late, but you have both kept in good shape and am positive you'll be just as great parents to our new baby as you were to me.

I look forward to finding out if it is a boy or girl, though. Until I know, I shall henceforth call it, 'Baby'.

Harry and Luna also send their congratulations and Harry wants to know if he is allowed to buy baby toys. If you wish to give him permission, please point out that one toy is customary. I think he would try to buy an entire store. So far, I've been able to talk him out of it until we can learn whether Baby is boy or girl.

I don't think that'll last long. He's already making a list of possible toys. Luna has joined him and they now refuse to listen to me. I swear, it's like fighting a war over land dominance with these two and I'm outnumbered.

Back to seriousness, I truly am happy and I can't wait to meet my new brother or sister. And, if my calculations are right, I may be around when it's due to be born! Please have something on hand for me to read about what to expect. Harry asked our librarian about such a book and he reports a very awkward conversation with our Head of House, McGonagall. I'm thankful for the help when I brought it up, but there's no way I'm willing to suffer the same discomfort unless I actually require it.

Mum, there is a little more to this than just congratulating you on the new baby. As I write this, it is the day after Harry and I have decided to become a couple. Yes, I know you told me you were sure it was going to happen and yes, I know you won the bet with Dad (and yes, I knew you made it – You didn't really think you could hide it from me, did you?)

I cannot tell you where I learned this information. I know this is going to sound like some poorly contrived romance novel plot, or like I'm under the influence of magic, but please keep in mind that I can confirm the following information with a source of the highest possible authority muggle or wizard could comprehend. That is the only hint I can give you, simply because I cannot give more.

Soul mates are real, but not quite what most stories make them out to be. From that source mentioned above, I have learned they are basically two halves of a whole, as you know, but it isn't like there is just only one person available for someone else. Think of it as the Yin and Yang symbol. You could have one white piece and three black pieces, and any of those black pieces could be possible soul mates and fit to make the whole. It is compatibility. But, when it comes to a relationship, we still have to work at it like any other possible relationship. We can and will still argue or have disagreements, but they are likely to be far fewer and we'll generally have a greater understanding of one another.

I have learned that Harry and I are, indeed soul mates. But, like that example above, he has two others beyond myself. We are aware of one of them, and the other is somewhere that he'll likely never know.

My problem is that same source I told you above is aware of these as well and pointed out the other girl is our best friend, Luna. She has been horribly abused while at school. She's been picked on, locked in broom closets for the weekend, forced to take potions that

make her hurl, she's even been locked out of her common room naked and forced to sleep the night away in a hideaway in the hall. The point is, she's generally been alone the entire time.

Because of that, and because of the nature of Harry's need to help people and that soul mate thing, she is falling for him hard. And we know it is real. I know she is not going to try and break Harry and I up. In fact, she's been trying to get us together, if I read her motivations right. But the thing is, I ... I don't know how to say this, so I think I will come right out and say it since you have brought up something similar.

I don't mind that she likes him and ... I'm wondering if you would be disappointed in me if I considered trying to share my boyfriend. I don't know if I could ... well, make it a true three-way relationship. I never really thought about something like that and I definitely never considered another girl before. But, while I am not in love with her, I am in love with Harry.

I cannot tell you how I know this other than to repeat, once again, it is the same source. But, I know that if Harry and I stay together, Luna will remain our best friend. I also know she will never accept anyone else for a partner other than him. I also know that she will eventually commit suicide. Not by killing herself, but ... I suppose you could say by allowing herself to die when she could stop it.

We cannot, and will not, consider breaking our friendship. We are her only friends and the first ones she's been able to trust who haven't stabbed her in the back, which I honestly don't understand. She's a pretty girl, extremely loyal, very nice, intelligent. I admit she's a little strange, but in a lovable way, and she loves to cuddle, kind of like Harry. After not much in the way of physical affection or touches that weren't painful, she and Harry just can't get enough.

I need help, Mum. Harry and I decided to be selfish for once and get together. But, no matter what we do, we can't think of a way to protect Luna. And I've been thinking about it very hard for the past couple of days. There just is NO other choice. The only one that MIGHT work is getting her a boyfriend, but we know it won't happen. Basically, no one can compare to Harry.

Am I wrong? Is this a bad idea? I'm just so confused and worried. Neither of us want to hurt her. And we know we could trust her. I

probably wouldn't have even seriously considered this except I realized something. Our friendship, if turned into a relationship, wouldn't be different at all, really. We already hug and cuddle and spend nearly all our time together. But, it's the other stuff that comes with dating that we would be adding. And some of that, we already do. Nothing serious! I promise! I just mean we kiss each other on the foreheads sometimes and, when Luna is locked out of her dorm or something is put in her bed like itching powder, she'll come to my bed to sleep to avoid the painful powder or, if it's something scary or painful for her, emotionally, she'll go to Harry's bed, but that is pretty rare and only really because she feels safest with him.

That actually reminds me. I am going to accept something called an 'Aegis' from Harry for our family. Basically, I learned in the wizarding world that muggles have no rights. If you attacked someone, you're almost guilty just for being there, even if you only defended yourself. Also, there are almost no women's rights. I was hit with a pretty bad curse a few weeks ago (I'm perfectly fine and healthy right now, Luna got me to the hospital wing almost immediately and I was fine from there) and I had no legal recourse if I had been hurt in a long-term way. Harry's family protection could provide that. It will also allow me to use magic whenever I want and basically ignore the underage laws, so I can show you what I've been learning!

Any advice you can provide me, Mum, I'm begging you for. I just don't know what to do.

I love you, Dad and Baby,

Hermione – The soon-to-be-best-older-sister-ever

PS: The bit about Harry and the book was a joke, I just felt like you could use a good laugh.

Emma gave a start when the shower turned off, realizing she had been sitting and staring at the note for a few minutes and shoved it into her pocket. She would show it to Dan later, after she had him in a, hopefully, good mood from her news. But, that was now going to wait until she could at least see about helping her little girl. That was the important think right now. She immediately began to mentally compose a response as she simultaneously prepared a shopping list for all of Dan's favorites.

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The first week of December was ending and students were getting excited by the Yule holiday. Hagrid had, once again, dragged a large pine tree he had uprooted into the school and the First Years had transfigured baubles to hang onto it. Even the Thundercats had, somehow, gotten into the spirit and were running amok in red and green outfits.

Hermione suspected Luna had transfigured them considering the fur people kept beaming at the serene blonde girl.

After their talk with Harry, Luna had a near transformation into her old, happy, calm, serene self that was full of smiles, laughter and hugs. It seemed Harry was making a concerted effort to spend time with them now that his worry was gone from hurting Luna. He still had no idea if Hermione had an idea, and she wasn't saying anything, but he realized to do otherwise was just hurting her anyway.

They were hiding their new relationship, sadly, but felt it necessary. They just didn't want to broadcast it to Luna until they had come to a decision. They didn't really care about anyone else. Well, except maybe Ginny. But, the young Weasley just didn't do anything other than look from afar. It had taken Hermione some digging, but apparently, Ginny didn't actually remember any magic from her first year except the first month or so. From there, most of what she remembered was fragmented and she had made a promise to work extra hard in exchange of going forward to her second year. She had apparently been given license to practice at home due to her trauma and to catch up.

She only knew that because she had spoken to the redhead. Even her own brothers, at least Ron and the twins, didn't seem to realize that had happened. It actually should have appeared obvious, Hermione thought. All of their stories were about this vivacious, rambunctious little sister that didn't take crap from anyone and wielded a wand like a live grenade if their horror at the as of yet unseen bat bogey hex was to be believed rather than embellishment.

Still, Hermione couldn't have been too much happier. Even if she hadn't had the opportunity to snog Harry like that first time, and she had been very tempted to use her time-turner and snog him until he

was blue in the face. When the three were cuddled on the couch in either the early mornings or late evenings, their arms around each other had taken on a much deeper meaning and the trailing fingers along her bare neck and occasionally her shoulder would leave her panting.

If she didn't like it so much, she'd have been worried at how strongly she reacted. Harry had confessed much the same, but if Luna had ever noticed the ... shift in the landscaping, she never said anything or bothered to move.

Hermione sighed in contentment as Harry sat next to her and Luna across for their morning meals. She was about half done with her oats and fruit and felt a general sense of holiday spirit in the air.

"Good morning," McGonagall said, coming up with a clipboard in her hand. "Are any of you planning to stay for the holiday?" She asked. Getting affirmatives from all three, she placed marks on their names and wished them a happy Sunday.

"I thought you might be visiting your father, Luna," Harry said.

"I originally intended to, but while my father was on his extended holiday, he met a woman," Luna said, leaning in and whispering as if telling a dirty secret. "She had given him an offer to see the fairies at Christmas, but he refused since I was going. When I learned, I decided to stay here with the two of you since you were planning on staying. It's been much too long for Daddy to be alone. I'm hoping he can find some happiness."

Harry blinked. 'What is it with all the romance just from me emancipating myself?' He wondered.

"Well, it'll be nice to spend the holiday with friends," Hermione said with a smile before she continued to eat. A small part of her was disappointed she wouldn't be able to kiss Harry whenever the urge struck, but not so much as to not be dwarfed by the happiness of actually having friends staying with each other.

Three owls landed on the table with the daily mail while the Prophet was delivered to the various students. Harry, it appeared, had a letter from Gringotts while Hermione got both the paper and a letter

from her mother which she immediately put in her pocket. "What'd you get?" She asked Harry.

"A letter from Gringotts about some business I provided them with. I'll need to go out soon and talk to them," he said, smiling widely. He had been looking forward to this.

"They still can't find Malfoy Senior," Hermione said in disgust, looking at the headline.

Harry leaned over and put his cheek close to Hermione's as he read over her shoulder.

Lucius Malfoy Still at Large!

By: Allowin Lyez

It's been nearly a week since Lucius Malfoy's failed attempt to assassinate the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge and the manhunt continues. His vaults at Gringotts have been ordered sealed, but treaties with the goblins deny the Ministry the ability to actually do as such. The best they can offer is a substantial bounty for the man's head and hope that the goblins will capture him and turn him over for the reward, which is unlikely. Still, no less than ten aurors are stationed in Diagon Alley at any given time in hopes of catching him before he can get to the neutral grounds of Gringotts bank.

The day following the attack, Ministry aurors raided Malfoy Manor only to discover nearly everything of value had already been taken from the home. There had even been found a hidden room under the floor in one room which had been emptied as well, though what it contained is a mystery at this point. Any attempts to contact the Malfoy heir go unheeded since he is a minor and cannot be questioned without a guardian present.

Minister Fudge has proclaimed that...

"Honestly! Do they really think he'll just show up in Diagon Alley and allow himself to be caught?" Hermione asked no one in particular.

"Well, with glamors, he could and no one would really know," Ron said from where he was eating eggs and hash. "I mean, Dad said he

was a Death Eater and really smart to never get caught. So, he might be able to, ya know?"

Hermione wondered when Ron had shown up, but put it aside since she had been focused on the article. "There's got to be a way to look through glamors."

"Some people can," Ron said with a shrug, "but only really powerful wizards like Dumbledore. And they usually have to train themselves to."

Hermione curled a pink lip in disgust before putting the paper down, the rest just as annoying or pointless. "Well, I'm going to the the library. I'll see you when you finish up, alright?"

"Alright. See you soon," Luna said while Harry grunted his agreement around his drink. He was mildly curious as Luna used the shield variant he had taught people to cut animal shapes out of the toast before she made a house from yet more toast, a yellow lake of over-easy eggs, pastures from hash browns, people from sausages and bales of hay out of orange slices.

Then, she once again played the part of a natural disaster, ignoring the pleading sausage people as they begged for mercy.

The fact that she charmed them to do so was a little awkward, but made sense considering every stab of her fork sounding like a quiet little clap of thunder.

Meanwhile, Hermione had rushed to the Room of Requirement where she created a room and checked her watch, deciding this was worth however long she needed to flip for, and then entered, not to come out again for two hours where she had read and then pondered.

Hello Hermione,

First, let me say I am so happy you are okay with my being pregnant. Don't fret. I feel like it's a little late in the game as well, but I'll be doing everything in my power to ensure we remain healthy and around for a very long time to raise this child. And you'll be a wonderful older sister!



Oh! You tell those two they don't need to buy any toys, but if they must, just one will suffice.

In regards to this protection you mentioned, however, I would like to get some information on it. If you understand it and feel it is something we should take, then by all means. We trust you and know you're an intelligent young woman. And we don't go into the magical world without you, so we needn't worry about a fight, but I suppose you never know when something may happen. But, please let us know exactly what it entails before you actually agree? We don't want you to get into something you may not have learned well enough to understand the full ramifications of. Like I said, you're intelligent and we trust you, but some things can only come with experience. And in regards to agreements, your father and I have much more of that, magical or no.

Now that those are out of the way, I suppose we should get to the important part, yes?

First, I think I have a suspicion of what you were referring to, but truly have to wonder what would make you think such a thing as to think of that as a source for information. I'm not discounting it. After all, with magic, perhaps it isn't as impossible as I may originally think. But still. Please just keep your eyes open, your wits sharp and think as logically as you can about such things.

Honey, I know I told you I had a relationship with two other girls when I was your age, and I did I will admit, but that was something that worked for me, at that time. Nothing came of it. Could it have? Perhaps. I had to leave, so I will never know.

Something I hadn't mentioned to you, that is much closer to your own situation, is perhaps my relationship with your father when it first started. When the two of us first got together, I was already with another girl in university. It wasn't exactly a relationship, more of a friends with benefits package, but we did care for one another a good deal. When your father joined ... well, that was actually a drunken night after finals and, thankfully, none of us regretted it after the fact, which I feel I should tell you will almost always happen. Almost never will a woman get drunk and sleep with someone and then not regret it in the morning unless she is just that promiscuous.

You may have already figured this out over time, but that other woman was your aunt Rebecca. You already know she isn't truly an aunt by blood, but until you were born she was a part of this family. She backed off after Dan and I chose to marry. Not because he was claimed or any such nonsense, but because she respected marriage in a way that she didn't want to intrude upon.

What I am trying to tell you is that I have been a part of two different three-way relationships. The first wasn't serious, but more coming of age than anything with few options of the other path. The second, however, was a much more fulfilling relationship that could have still been going had Rebecca not chosen to pull back.

Any relationship takes work, trust, perseverance and a good amount of commitment, Hermione. A relationship with more than two people is going to take a great deal more of these things if you want it to last, which you are going to want to be very sure about. It isn't just the relationship, either. Being open about such a relationship is not really very well received, honey. Most people will look at you and think you're a slag or have no self respect or honor. I don't know if it is different in the magical world, but if they're as behind the times as you lead us to believe, then it is probably even worse there. I understand Harry is a Lord. In Medieval times, Lords could have multiple partners, but it was still not exactly a normal thing. And this isn't Medieval times, even if parts of it appear to be in your world.

The long and short of this, is that you must do what you want, what you feel is right, even knowing what you'll be facing. Forget everything about soul mates and your source, whatever it may be since it obviously didn't give you the answer. Ask yourself the first important question.

Can you honestly handle being with Harry, and knowing he will be in the arms of another woman at least part of the time?

For me, the answer was yes, but that was also because that 'other woman' was also 'my' woman as well. We all three shared. It wasn't two different relationships, but one larger one.

If you were to ask me right now if I would be as willing to consider another woman in our relationship, I can safely tell you I would be quite adamantly against it. Not because of the baby. But because your father is mine and now mine, only. Rebecca could stand a

chance, but it would be slim to none. Having my partner to myself is nice in many ways, and I'm not referring to the physical. Knowing that his entire being is centered on me alone (perhaps I should say his 'romantic being', since he does love you just as much, of course, merely differently) is such a rush!

I can't be more helpful, I'm afraid, because any advice beyond this would be to push you one way or another. The problem with that is that it could be a happier situation for you either way. There are good sides to having a third partner, of course. There's more love, affection and cuddles, as you seem to be aware (and hopefully not too aware quite yet.) You always have that wonderful female friend you can talk to and you never have to worry about your discussions on your love life leaving that love life. But, you may have to deal with possible maneuvering, too, where one girl tries to become the more important girlfriend. This Luna seems like that may not be the case right now, but remember you're still young. While you're learning what you like and do not like, you are also becoming who you will be for your lives, and it could be someone very different from who you are now.

I will not ever, not even for a moment, be disappointed or ashamed of you, Hermione. Even if Harry weren't in the picture and you introduced me to your girlfriend, I would still be happy for you. And it would certainly be hypocritical of me to be upset about something I, myself, have enjoyed and experimented with. And even if you haven't considered women, you never know. It may be something you'll later learn isn't all that bad.

I'm not telling you to test those waters, Hermione. Understand that. But, I AM telling you not to be afraid to try as long as it is someone you know you can trust and won't hurt you should the situation arise. As I said, you're learning what you'll like and what you won't. And tastes are always changing. I remember when you loved green beans, carrots, spinach and yogurt. That phase didn't last very long, but it was still something you loved quite literally one day, and then wouldn't dare touch the next. I still can't figure out how you came up with that concoction.

I love you, Hermione. We both do. And whatever you decide, we're here for you if you need us.

Your loving mother

Hermione put the parchment down and sighed. While her biggest fear had been put aside in this letter, it arose one she hadn't even considered: public opinion on a high-profile celebrity in a school of moronic children who ostracized anything abnormal from their own world views.

"Well damn," she muttered.

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Hermione sighed as she and Luna got into her bed while the rest of the dorm room was quietly sleeping away. She had been a little reticent to talk most of the day since breakfast while her mind was on the issue at hand. She had been thinking and thinking, but couldn't really come up with a viable solution to her question.

Basically, was it worth it?

On one hand, she had Harry as it was. They were together, and happily at that. But a part of that happiness was from Harry believing Hermione could come up with a solution, which Hermione felt sure she could. And she had four such solutions in mind.

On another hand, she wasn't foolish enough to believe that two of those solutions would actually succeed if put to the test. One was get Luna a boyfriend of her own. As of right now, Hermione didn't know any boys who really cared for the quirky blonde other than Harry. While she could try to set one up with her, there was nothing to suggest it would work and far too much evidence to suggest it would fail miserably. The other possible solution was not to stop being friends with Luna, but slowly push her away to a distance that most people were comfortable with in regards to friends. Less cuddling and hugging, no more sleeping in the same bed.

That would fail the first time they tried it and be far too obvious by this point. They'd just gone two and a half months of gladly accepting and even initiating such sessions with her.

The third, possible solution, was talk with Luna and explain what Hermione and Harry were planning in regards to their relationship and basically try to guilt Luna into protecting herself by saying they wanted Luna as a part of their life forever and as long as possible.

Not a foolproof plan and one that guaranteed her to a life of solitude and painful loneliness if she really would never consider someone other than Harry, which was the main reason option one was expected to fail if it ever got attempted.

The last and final option was what Hermione was considering, which was bringing her into the relationship. The fear of this, however, was not that it would fail, but what it would mean. She would be with Harry, and with another girl. That meant she would suffer those like Draco Malfoy who would say mean and hurtful things like she wasn't woman enough for Harry and he needed another girl to be happy. Or they may say horrible things like she was nothing but a toy to Harry.

They may also say things like she was a cauldron licker or worse things that she hadn't heard yet in the wizarding world about lesbian witches. She knew it wasn't such a big deal and being with Harry would be worth the public comments and opinions, but this would definitely put her into the spotlight and most likely in a bad way no matter what. And as much as she didn't care what people thought or said, she knew that those spoken words or judging looks would definitely make her feel bad and probably make her cry.

Right now, she heard bad things like 'mudblood' or 'whore' from those of Draco's ilk, but it was stuff that was obviously not true or things that were proven not to matter or that she didn't honestly care about because she had no control, like being muggleborn. Things that proved how stupid they were.

But if she did this, those comments would hurt more because she chose that life and her partners.

The simple facts that she had considered from the very beginning, however, drew her forward and firmed her resolve. She loved Harry. No doubt, no hesitation and no restrictions. She ... cared deeply for Luna. She didn't really know what it was, nor could she rightfully explain it. It was something like best friend, but certainly a good chance at being more. Yet, it most definitely was not romantic love. It may possibly have a chance of going that way, sure, but right now? There was no romantic affection there at all.

"Good night, Hermione," Luna whispered, smiling sleepily and yawning cutely. "Don't let the Snorkacks bite."

Hermione nibbled her bottom lip as she watched Luna wriggle her head on her pillow, making a comfortable hollow for her head to rest in. It wasn't romantic affection, was it? "L-Luna?" She asked hesitantly.

Blue-gray eyes fluttered open for a moment and focused on Hermione, clearing up almost immediately as she saw the worry on Hermione's face. "What is it, Hermione?"

"I ... I was wondering if you would be willing to let me try an experiment. I can't really explain it at the moment, but it's something that might help Harry and us in the future."

"Of course you can," Luna said simply. It didn't really matter what it was. If it helped her friends, Luna would go on a rampage through a nundu mating area if necessary.

"It ... would be a little ... weird," Hermione said with a blush, averting her eyes from the eyes that held no clue what she was about to ask, but still somehow appeared to judge her, weighing her. "It would definitely push the bounds of our friendship, though I don't know by how much."

"Hermione, it doesn't really matter, does it?" Luna asked. "I'm your friend. I would do anything to help you and Harry."

Hermione looked at Luna, her cheeks a little redder and decided there was nothing for it. It had to be done. She had to know. The bushy-haired one licked her lips and leaned forward slightly, pausing and then slowly leaning forward the rest of the way and pressed her trembling lips against Luna's own, sucking gently, marveling at how soft Luna's were compared to Harry's. She was surprised when Luna, while not really understanding what Hermione was attempting to accomplish, kissed back. The blonde girl was far more hesitant than Harry and Hermione's nerves barely allowed her to note it, but she did.

Hermione pulled back and looked into Luna's eyes, curious that the blonde girl was smiling back at her.

"Please let me know if it helps Harry?" She asked quietly, closing her eyes.

'No romantic feeling at all,' Hermione thought to herself, laying her head down and waiting for her heart and nerves to calm down.

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[Author's Note:] - Tune in next time to see things play out! And who is the next to truly die?

Forewarning: Hermione is not ignoring the fact that Harry went back in time about five years. But, she's a hormonal teenager who just found out she can have the guy she wants and ... well, there's more to it than that, but you'll discover that later. But, at the same time, the Luna bit is a more pressing matter to her right now.

Chp18